

What is History in International Relations?

John M. Hobson and George Lawson

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History and International Relations

To some extent, 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, Hedley Bull and Stanley Hoffman have all employed history as a means of illuminating their research. Indeed, Wight made searching the desiderata of international history the sine qua non of international theory, the best that could be hoped for in a discipline without a core *problématique* of its own.¹ Although often considered to have been banished by the scientific turn in International Relations (IR) during the Cold War, at least in the United States, history never really went away as a tool of IR theory. And in recent years the (re)turn of history has been one of the most striking features of the various openings in IR theory ushered in by the end of the Cold War.

As such, this forum is extremely timely, posing a series of important questions about the relationship between history and IR, and questioning the status of IR's recent historical (re)turn. The general issue is a pressing one because Fred Northedge's original goal in setting up *Millennium* was to provide a (British) counterweight to the 'ahistorical positivist project' that had engulfed mainstream American IR. Thus by bringing history back in, albeit in a critical way, Northedge's thinking reflected a now commonly held assumption that there is a transatlantic divide that separates a historically informed British IR from a history-less US mainstream. And, in turn, these perceptions form the basis of the current forum.

We would particularly like to thank Justin Rosenberg for his pertinent advice though, of course, we take final responsibility.

1. Martin Wight, 'Why Is There No International Theory?', in *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics*, eds Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), 17–34.

But in certain key respects we want to argue that these perceptions – common as they are – are misrepresentations, reflecting a series of widely held antinomies that are falsely assumed to underpin the discipline. The juxtaposition of history-less/ahistorical US IR versus British historical IR is misleading because history *is* important to mainstream US IR (as we explain in the first section). Moreover, we also find problematic the type of binary engendered by Robert Cox's distinction between critical (historical) theory and history-less/ahistorical problem-solving theory. The problem with this formulation is that it occludes a deeper, more fundamental issue, one which is rarely overtly discussed: the question of whether there is a single mode of historical research in IR.² In this article we unravel this claim by posing the question: 'What is history in IR?'. In the process, the second section of the piece outlines four modes of history in IR, all of which can be situated along a continuum ranging from macro- to micro-analysis, all of which provide different visions of history, and all of which deploy history in different ways. This move means searching above and beyond the binaries posed by this forum, whether considered as positivism vs. post-positivism, or as an apparently unbridgeable transatlantic divide. In fact, our contention is that the central issue when it comes to understanding the relationship between history and IR is not one of 'British historical IR vs. American non-historical IR', nor one of post-positivist 'pure history' vs. traditional ahistorical positivism. Rather, our portrayal of four ideal-typical modes of historical research presents quite different points of departure for considering the history/theory relationship, which in turn has potentially important ramifications for the way that we 'do' IR theory. And equally importantly, once we set up this heuristic, we find that the principal camps in the so-called 'history wars' – namely traditional (positivist) historians and critical (poststructuralist-inspired) historiographers – turn out to occupy spaces that are surprisingly close together.

Asking the question 'What is history?', therefore, leads us to a deeper understanding of the relationship between history and IR. Although representatives of these various historical modes of explanation often engage in forms of one-upmanship over what constitutes 'true' or 'proper' historical analysis, our central claim is that all four approaches

2. Notable exceptions include: Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'International Relations and the "Problem of History"', *Millennium* 34, no. 1 (2005): 115–36; Chris Hill, 'History and International Relations', in *International Relations: British and American Experiences*, ed. Steve Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985); Ian Clark, 'Divided by a Common Language', *Government and Opposition* 37, no. 2 (2002): 271–9; Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, 'International History and International Relations', *International Affairs* 76, no. 4 (2000): 741–54; and Zara Steiner, 'On Writing International History', *International Affairs* 73, no. 3 (1997): 531–46. For a discussion relating to International History, see Patrick Finney, 'Still "Marking Time": Text, Discourse and Truth in International History', *Review of International Studies* 27 (2001): 291–309.

can be seen as legitimate modes of historical analysis. In short, we need to recognise that no one 'owns' history. As such, our advocacy of one of these modes of analysis – historicist historical sociology – is made not on the basis that it delivers a *truer* form of historical analysis. Rather, we claim that the main benefit of historical sociology lies in its capacity to conduct research which is both rich historically and fertile theoretically. Justifying this claim, and laying out the core wagers – both theoretical and empirical – of historical sociology in IR, are the subject of the third section of the article. In the conclusion we briefly outline the consequences of such a move – most notably a shift towards seeing historical sociology at the centre of IR as a discipline.

The Eternal Transatlantic Divide?

While most scholars have tended to treat neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism as *the* representatives of mainstream US IR, we would now surely have to include constructivism as the third prong in what can be considered a triumvirate.³ This immediately blurs the claim that mainstream US IR is ahistorical. For while there are clearly many varieties of constructivist IR, all versions reject a neo-neo instrumentalist rational actor model in which actors' interests are predetermined and universal through time and place. As such, constructivism is propelled towards accounts of time and place specificity, context and change, rendering it *necessarily* historical and sociological in orientation. Indeed, it fits unproblematically into the mode of historicist historical sociology in IR. However, although constructivists occupy an important place on the history/IR spectrum, it is not the case that neo-neo approaches lie outside of it.⁴ Even the apparently archetypal version of ahistoricist IR – Waltzian neorealism – has been historically 'filled in' by theorists such as Robert Gilpin, John Mearsheimer, and Colin and Miriam Elman.⁵ Robert Keohane, Lisa Martin and others have applied historical analysis to a rational choice neoliberal

3. Indeed, this point is becoming increasingly accepted. See, for example, Robert Gilpin, *Global Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). Legro and Moravcsik invite constructivists into a 'meta-paradigm' that acts as an umbrella under which mainstream approaches can operate; see Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, 'Is Anybody Still a Realist?', *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1999): 5–55. On the links between realism and constructivism, see Richard Ned Lebow, 'Constructive Realism', *International Studies Review* 6, no. 2 (2004): 346–8.

4. See also Geoffrey Roberts, 'History, Theory and the Narrative Turn in IR', *Review of International Studies* 32, no. 4 (2006): 704–7.

5. Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003); Colin Elman and Miriam Elman, eds, *Bridges and Boundaries* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

institutionalist research agenda.⁶ And historical research is germane to the work of neoclassical realists such as Randall Schweller (as much as it was to Hans Morgenthau and E. H. Carr before them).⁷

Of course, because many readers will question this claim, particularly in relation to neorealism, it is worth dwelling on this point for a moment. For while many would accept that neorealism deploys historical analysis, nevertheless the theory is seen as problematic because it is unable to explain international change – especially systems change – through historical time. This claim was first made in some of the key critical works of the early 1980s, most notably those of John Ruggie, Richard Ashley and Robert Cox. Since then it has become an axiom of critical theory that neorealism ‘contains only a reproductive logic, but no transformational logic’;⁸ that neorealism is a ‘historicism of stasis; [one that] freezes the political institutions of the current world order’;⁹ or that ‘[p]roblem-solving [neorealist] theory is non-historical or ahistorical, since it, in effect, posits a continuing present’.¹⁰

The immediate problem with this position is that neorealism *can* explain systems change. Thus, for example, Robert Gilpin has argued that changes in the international system – caused by states’ responses to the escalations of military costs experienced during the European Military Revolution (1550–1660) – induced the transformation of feudal Christendom into the modern sovereign state system.¹¹ No less importantly, this argument could be made within a pure Waltzian framework, albeit one which has largely been developed outside the discipline.¹²

6. Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Lisa Martin, ‘The Rational State Choice of Multilateralism’, in *Multilateralism Matters*, ed. J. G. Ruggie (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 91–121.

7. Randall Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler’s Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006). For the broadly historical sociological aspect of Carr’s and Morgenthau’s arguments, see J. M. Hobson, *The State and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 45–61.

8. John Ruggie, ‘Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Towards a Neo-Realist Synthesis’, *World Politics* 35, no. 2 (1983): 285.

9. Richard K. Ashley, ‘The Poverty of Neorealism’, *International Organization* 38, no. 2 (1984): 257.

10. Robert W. Cox, ‘Social Forces, States, and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory’, *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981): 129.

11. Gilpin, *War and Change*, ch. 3.

12. Charles Tilly, *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975); Michael Mann, *States, War and Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988). For an explanation of the neorealist basis of Tilly’s approach, see Hobson, *State and International Relations*, ch. 6, and

Even so, Gilpin's account holds closely to the Waltzian format.¹³ Anarchic interstate competition has been used to explain the rise and development not just of the modern European state but also of European capitalism (whether by realist IR scholars or realist-inspired historical sociologists).¹⁴ Likewise, although much critical (and constructivist) theory claims that neorealism is redundant because it neither foresaw nor explained the end of the Cold War, there are two issues which, through a sleight of hand, are conflated to produce this indictment: the Waltzian claim of the relative stability of a bipolar world and the idea that international change could not take place without great power war.¹⁵ But absent these two specific criteria, at least one realist-inspired sociologist not only predicted the end of the Cold War but also provided an explanation of its demise.¹⁶ As such, it may well be that Waltz was unnecessarily defensive in asserting that neorealism cannot, nor should not, explain change where change is defined only by shifts in the ordering principles of the international system.¹⁷

All this means that the familiar refrain that mainstream US IR is void of either historical research or the capacity to explain international change turns out to be a fallacy at best and a pernicious construct at worst. Despite the claims made by numerous critical scholars, it would be fairer to say that Waltz sought to banish not history or historical analysis from IR but *historicist* conceptions of the international from the discipline (a point we return to in the next section).¹⁸ And more generally, the return of classical liberalism, the rise of neoclassical realism and constructivism, and the reconvening of approaches like the English school's mark less the emergence of a historical turn in IR, but more an acceleration and deepening of trends already present in the discipline; trends which, it should be noted, can be extrapolated back to 19th-century IR

also Stephen Hobden, *International Relations and Historical Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1998).

13. See Hobson, *State and International Relations*, ch. 2.

14. For the former, see Gilpin, *War and Change*; Gautam Sen, *The Military Origins of Industrialisation and International Trade Rivalry* (London: Pinter, 1984); and for the latter see Randall Collins, *Weberian Sociological Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), ch. 2; Jean Baechler, *The Origins of Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975); Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990–1990* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

15. On this see William Wohlforth, 'Realism and the End of the Cold War', *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994/5): 91–129.

16. Collins, *Weberian Sociological Theory*, ch. 8.

17. Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Reflections on *Theory of International Politics*: A Response to My Critics', in *Neorealism and Its Critics*, ed. Robert Keohane (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), esp. 323–30. On this specific criticism, see Barry Buzan, Charles Jones and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

18. See especially Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979), 43–9.

scholarship.¹⁹ History has always served as a tool for testing the validity of theoretical positions, and both mainstream and non-mainstream scholarship is perfectly content to use history as a barometer or litmus test for adjudicating between rival schemas. Given this, it may be that the standard claim needs to be turned on its head. Rather than marginal historical voices facing an ahistorical mainstream, perhaps we are all, and have always been, historians after all. And if this is the case, we need to ask whether Northedge’s original rationale for setting up *Millennium* still stands up, or indeed if it ever did. Moreover, if it is the case that we are ‘all historians in IR’, this begs an important question: what is it we are talking about when we talk about history?

Four Modes of ‘History in IR’

Fundamental to our argument is the claim that there is no single mode of historical research in IR. Rather, we see there as being four principal modes of historical enquiry, the excavation of which enables us to move beyond the current confusion that surrounds the way in which history is used in the discipline. We label these four ideal-typical modes ‘history without historicism’, ‘historicist historical sociology’, ‘radical historicism’ and ‘traditional history’ (as represented in Figure 1). The immediate point to note is that these four ideal-types are situated along a continuum ranging from the macro to the micro. Thus, while neorealist historical analysis occupies the highest level of generality, radical historicism represents its converse. Our own preferred approach is that of historicist historical sociology, which overlaps with the other three modes. Significantly, for

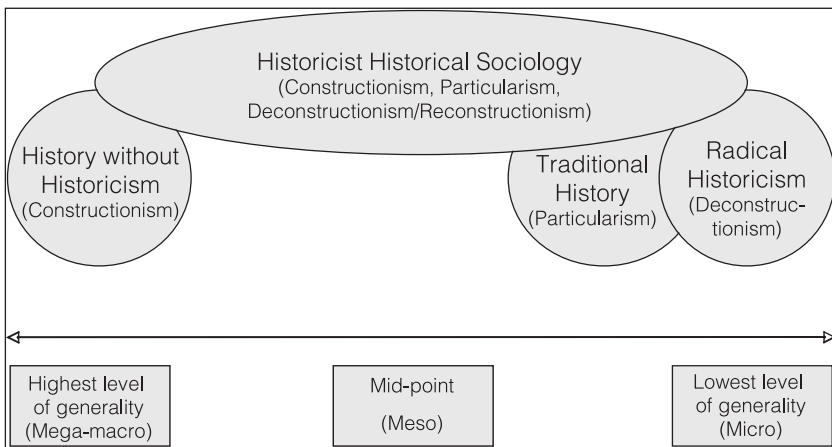


Figure 1: Four modes of history in IR

19. On this see especially Brian C. Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy* (New York: SUNY Press, 1998).

all the heat of the 'history wars' that have taken place between critical historiographers and traditional historians, we see these two modes as having much in common, hence their overlapping representation in Figure 1. Our argument is that answers to the question 'What is history in IR?' will *necessarily* vary according to where the researcher sits on this continuum. Until we recognise this point, we shall be talking at cross purposes, indeed speaking different 'historical' languages. In turn, this induces misunderstandings at the heart of the discipline and confusion over fundamental questions surrounding the nature of IR theory and how we 'do' historically informed research. In what follows, we take the two extremes that are situated at the poles of Figure 1 before proceeding to discuss traditional history and culminating in our preferred mode of analysis – historicist historical sociology.

History without Historicism

Thus far we have noted that neorealism not only utilises and explores history but can also explain international systems change through time. Accordingly, this marks neorealist historiography as a legitimate mode of history in IR. By the same token, neoliberal institutionalism would also feature as an example of this kind of history. However, a common claim (often made by constructivists) asserts that neoliberal institutionalism and neorealism are ahistorical and asociological on account of their assumption that actors are imbued with timeless essential properties that are pre-social.²⁰ But the immediate problem here can be discussed through an analogous consideration of rational choice theorists working in the discipline of historical sociology. If the common IR perception is correct, then we would be forced to denounce prominent (rational choice) historical sociologists such as Douglass North, Margaret Levi and Edgar Kiser as ahistorical and asociological.²¹ And by implication it would mean that the many historical sociologists who use either implicit neorealist analytical or rational choice theoretical lenses are not, after all, *historical* sociologists, the end-point of which is to render the very term 'historical sociology' a misnomer.

Interestingly, debates on history/historical sociology within the discipline of historical sociology provide a mirror for the debates on history

20. For example Christian Reus-Smit, 'The Idea of History and History with Ideas', in *Historical Sociology of International Relations*, eds Stephen Hobden and John M. Hobson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 120–40.

21. Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Margaret Levi, *Of Rule and Revenue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Edgar Kiser and Joshua Kane, 'Revolution and State Structure: The Bureaucratization of Tax Administration in Early Modern England and France', *American Journal of Sociology* 107, no. 1 (2001): 183–223.

which we discuss in this article.²² In particular, Edgar Kiser and Michael Hechter have advocated a form of rational choice ‘grand narrative’ historical sociology, one which marries well with the kind of approach used by neorealists and neoliberal institutionalists.²³ Kiser and Hechter invoke a mode of historical enquiry that operationalises the highest abstract ‘scope conditions’. As they put it, ‘[h]istorically defined scope conditions are based on particular spatial and temporal parameters (e.g. a given argument may only apply to 17th century France). In contrast, abstract scope conditions merely contain general specifications of conditions that could exist in many times and places.’²⁴ In particular, they object to the arguments of Quadagno and Knapp, who, in effect, argue for a *historicist* approach that rejects transhistorical categories by pointing out the specificities of events according to their particular spatio-temporal contexts. Accordingly, the use of the term ‘historically defined scope conditions’ might be better expressed as ‘historicist’ scope conditions. For in our conception, ‘historicism’ – *contra* the ways in which it is frequently used, for example from Karl Popper to Dipesh Chakrabarty²⁵ – is a mode of historical enquiry that recognises the specificity of events within their temporal and spatial contexts and rejects transhistorical categories that render history as exhibiting isomorphic properties. Accordingly, we term this mode ‘history without historicism’.

This mode of enquiry, Kiser and Hechter argue, has the virtue of establishing general/universalist propositions that can be applied across time and place. That is, they seek to construct not just a narrative but a grand narrative that has universal application. In turn, this means that their theoretical arguments are amenable to testing, thereby conforming to what they would consider to be strict social scientific criteria. And it also means that their approach is geared at predicting events either as they unfold or as they might unfold in the future. In support of this argument, one might even go so far as to ask rhetorically that if history provides no lessons for the present or the future, then what utility does it

22. See especially Edgar Kiser and Michael Hechter, ‘The Role of General Theory in Comparative-Historical Sociology’, *American Journal of Sociology* 97, no. 1 (1991): 1–30; Edgar Kiser and Michael Hechter, ‘The Debate on Historical Sociology: Rational Choice Theory and Its Critics’, *American Journal of Sociology* 104, no. 3 (1998): 785–816; Jill Quadagno and Stan Kapp, ‘Have Historical Sociologists Forsaken Theory? Thoughts on the History/Theory Relationship’, *Sociological Methods and Research* 20, no. 4 (1992): 481–507; Margaret R. Somers, ‘“We’re No Angels”: Realism, Rational Choice, and Relationalism in Social Science’, *American Journal of Sociology* 104, no. 3 (1998): 722–84.

23. Kiser and Hechter, ‘Debate on Historical Sociology’.

24. Kiser and Hechter, ‘Debate on Historical Sociology’, 797.

25. Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge, 2002); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

have and, by implication, what is the purpose of studying it? Moreover, Kiser and Hechter note: '[w]e think that science progresses by testing clear general propositions and by attempting to resolve the anomalies that this testing process invariably reveals'.²⁶ And, not surprisingly, this leads them to argue that such a historical mode of research is important because it allows the fulfilment of coherent research programmes.

The summary produced by Kiser and Hechter reproduces the essence of 'history without historicism', a mode of history that underpins neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism within IR. Indeed, all the criteria that they stipulate concerning an adequate historical sociology conform precisely to those laid down by neorealists (including Kenneth Waltz). And inverting the point made earlier, if Kiser and Hechter's approach is a legitimate mode of historical sociology, then by implication one might label neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism as representing a legitimate mode of historical enquiry.

In this mode of historical analysis in an IR context, history takes on the role of 'scripture' – as the application of 'lessons' and inviolate rules that can be used to inform current policy and support research hypotheses. So, for example, the 'lessons of Nazi appeasement' become 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; and 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 superiority married to the promotion – by force if necessary – of democratic ideals around the world.²⁷ All in all, history without historicism provides a potentially rich stream of data, producing lessons and acting as test cases for deductively derived hypotheses.

Radical Historicism

Moving to the other extreme (situated on the right-hand side of Figure 1) we encounter radical historicism. This mode of research first emerged within the field of literary criticism. It is based on the premise that a literary work can only be considered as a product of a particular time and place. That is, no text serves as the autonomous product of an author understood as an isolated creation, but is reflective of a unique cultural and intellectual milieu.²⁸ This is a kind of deep contextualism, one which finds its clearest expression in the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. In a recent example of radical historicism in IR, Nick Vaughan-Williams argues that the historical turn in IR needs to be deconstructed.

26. Kiser and Hechter, 'Debate on Historical Sociology', 788.

27. See also Markus Kornprobst, 'Comparing Apples and Oranges? Leading and Misleading Uses of Historical Analogies', *Millennium* 36, no. 2 (2007): 29–49.

28. This was first discussed in Stephen Greenblatt, *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance* (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1982).

For Vaughan-Williams, the idea of history deployed by most scholars of the historical turn in IR is ahistorical even to the point of being anti-historical. This new historicism marries up with the poststructuralist conception of IR theory, which subscribes to the radical indeterminacy of history. Thus Richard Ashley characterises the prevailing historical approaches in IR as akin to 'a [form] of representation that arrests ambiguity and controls the proliferation of meaning by imposing a standard and a standpoint of interpretation that is taken to be fixed and independent of the time it represents'.²⁹ This tendency, Vaughan-Williams argues, is essentially ahistorical in the first instance because it:

implies the necessity (and possibility) of a stance outside of both history and politics from which it is possible to arrive at a singular understanding of what is often referred to as historicity. ... Such a stance is of course fantastical. More specifically still [such] an imposition has particularly important implications for IR since any attempt to stifle the 'equivocity of history' constitutes a violent dehistoricisation, which, in turn, may have significant political ramifications.³⁰

This reading holds that *the* truth is not out there simply awaiting discovery. In place of *the* truth that does not exist, there are many truths – indeed an undecidable infinity of possible truths. Ultimately this position embraces a view of history as an infinite problem that can never be mastered;³¹ to attempt to do so is merely to fall back into another totalising grand narrative. And so, for radical historicists, the historically minded IR scholar (or any historian for that matter) can never arrive at the terminus of historical closure and is, therefore, necessarily stranded on a train journey-without-end. To disembark the train for firmer, more stable, ground is to sacrifice the history-ness of history that deconstructionism embraces 'in favour of an ahistorical – even anti-historical – search for certainty, security, and surety in interpretive closure',³² thereby placing firm historical meaning perpetually out of reach.

What kind of history, then, does radical historicism produce? First and foremost, the approach rejects the construction of grand narratives, thereby placing it at odds with the kind of macro-history that neorealist and neoliberal institutionalist IR theory produces. As implied above, reading history either through a theoretical lens or via the construction of a broader narrative is to fall into the trap of 'mastering history' so that it conforms to particular political and ideological ends. As such, the point of 'doing history' is to resist an attempt at 'mastery'. Rather,

29. Richard K. Ashley, 'Living on Borderlines: Man, Post-structuralism, and War', in *International/Intertextual Relations*, eds James Der Derian and Michael J. Shapiro (New York: Lexington Books, 1989), 263.

30. Vaughan-Williams, 'Problem of History', 117–18.

31. See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

32. Vaughan-Williams, 'Problem of History', 131.

deconstruction – either of the events themselves or of the histories that are constructed by historians/social scientists – reveals merely the *doxa* of power-political positions that lie beneath.

Typical examples of this kind of thinking can be found in the postmodern wing of postcolonial studies and postcolonial International Relations. Following Edward Said,³³ all modernist histories of the rise and development of the modern world or the modern international system are to be deconstructed to reveal the underlying Eurocentric/Orientalist meta-narrative that informs them.³⁴ In the process, such analyses reveal how major theories unwittingly reflect the hegemonic aspirations of the West. Moreover, these theories not merely reflect but also provide a sanctioning, legitimating function that *constitutes* Western thinking as imperialist-hegemonic. Likewise, such an approach seeks to reveal how Western actions ultimately reflect a Eurocentric/Orientalist posture towards the non-West.³⁵ And in strong contrast to the constructionist-narrative approach of mega-macro history, this mode insists on ‘deconstruction without reconstruction’, since reconstruction merely leads back into the cul-de-sac of a totalising grand narrative. Moreover, many go so far as to argue that because all attempts at writing history must conform to power-knowledge nexuses, reconstructing historical narratives should be avoided since this would act merely to replace one form of domination (Eurocentrism/Orientalism) with another (e.g. Occidentalism).³⁶ Accordingly, radical historicism provides the antithesis of the grand-scale constructionism of the mega-macro approach.

Traditional History

Thus far we have differentiated between the two extremes represented in Figure 1 – constructionist ‘history without historicism’ and deconstructionist ‘radical historicism’. At one level, this might appear curious in that, as anyone familiar with the ‘history wars’ will know, the main combatants are traditional historians and critical historiographers. In our representation, rather than being diametrically opposed, these positions have much in common, so much so that they are represented as

33. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978).

34. For example Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

35. For example Roxanne Lynn Doty, *Imperial Encounters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Albert J. Paolini, *Navigating Modernity* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1999); Pal Ahluwalia, *Politics and Post-colonial Theory* (London: Routledge, 2001); Naeem Inayatullah and David L. Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (London: Routledge, 2004).

36. For example Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

overlapping categories in Figure 1. As such, it makes sense to begin by briefly considering the issues that underlie the history wars before proceeding to consider the important similarities between traditional history and radical historicism.

The main issue at stake in the history wars revolves around the difference between positivist research and deconstructionism.³⁷ Radical historicists reject the test as to what constitutes 'proper history', at least in the way that this is deployed by traditional historians. In the traditionalist conception, 'proper history' is based on a Rankinean positivist methodology in that the fact–value distinction enables the historian to generate a form of truth, at least as far as this is accessible via appropriate training, archival research and immersion in primary documents. Traditional historians are comfortable with the view that there is a world 'out there' which can be explained via considered, learned historical analysis. A rigorous 'objective/atheoretical' approach to relics (archives/primary documents) is vital to this process. Ultimately though, a causal analysis of any event is attainable such that critical deconstructionism is seen as making nonsense of history, thereby leading to the familiar accusations of nihilism and anti-historical posturing. Moreover, traditional historians complain that radical historicists essentially mock history. As one prominent positivist historian writes: 'Auschwitz was not a discourse. It trivialises mass murder to see it as a text. The gas chambers were not a piece of rhetoric. Auschwitz was indeed inherently a tragedy and cannot be seen as either a comedy or a farce.'³⁸

Traditional historians reject the application of aprioristic theoretical templates to the study of history, thereby differentiating themselves from those modes of history that are situated on the left-hand side of Figure 1 (i.e. mega-macro history and historicist historical sociology). Viewing history through theoretical lenses is seen as futile. Indeed, theoretically informed approaches are denounced not just for their theoretical apriorism but also for their reliance on secondary sources. This, in turn, leads to the claim that such approaches are either grand syntheses

37. For the traditionalist perspective, see Arthur Marwick, 'Two Approaches to Historical Study: The Metaphysical (Including Post-modernism) and the Historical', *Journal of Contemporary History* 30, no. 1 (1995): 5–35; David Cannadine, ed., *What Is History Now?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004); Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 2001). For the critical historiographical position, see Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Hayden White, *Metalhistory* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); and Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991). For a pertinent summary within an IR context, see Vaughan-Williams, 'Problem of History', 119–25. And for an equally pertinent summary of the traditional and new critical variants of International History, see Finney, 'Still "Marking Time"', 291–309.

38. Evans, *Defence of History*, 124.

or simply 'make-believe' versions of the 'true' historical record, in which theoretically informed scholars select the 'facts' in advance without holding them to objective scrutiny. Overall, traditional historians dismiss theoretically informed historical approaches for simply 'making up history' in pursuit of a theoretical vision and compressing or forcing the complexities of history into facile pigeonholes.³⁹

However, it could be argued that, with the exception of the sacrosanct status accorded to 'facts' and relics, these objections are not really so different from the denunciations made by radical historicists of theoretically informed historical narratives. Both of these apparently antithetical modes of analysis exhibit incredulity towards grand narratives. Both see such visions as unhistorical and presentist. Both fetishise the particular in order to resist the pitfalls of a grand narrative; indeed their immediate shared instinct is to particularise. Both modes trace how one-thing-followed-another in an unfolding of events that is deemed to be so contingent as to be unreplicable. Both agree that such approaches impose dangerous ideological visions on world history. Thus where traditional historians see such visions as 'bad historical polemic', radical historicists see them as 'ahistorical totalising projects'. And, of course, both tend to deride transhistorical attempts to present universalist pictures of causation that range across time and place. In this sense both approaches in effect place broad theoretical findings out of reach. Indeed, both traditional historians and radical historicists deconstruct grand narratives while refusing, albeit for different reasons, to reconstruct an alternative.

Thus despite their epistemological differences (which have captured all the headlines), traditional historians and radical historicists converge around a tendency to particularism and in a shared resistance to theoretically inspired narratives. As such, both approaches are far more alike than they would care to think, at least about the make-up of the social world and the possibility of historical theorisation. Thus although the history wars evidenced a tremendous amount of heat, this appears inversely proportional to the amount of light that the debate emits. For behind the fire and brimstone lies a far less melodramatic, but much more important, set of *shared* assumptions, assumptions that are unacknowledged.

Historicist Historical Sociology

The fourth mode of historical analysis – historicist historical sociology – occupies a central place on our diagram. As such, it overlaps with the other three modes of analysis and, importantly, contains many self-defined historical sociologists and potentially other historians

39. It is noteworthy that one traditional historian was said to have claimed in a private conversation that he revelled in undertaking historical research into the problems of Northern Ireland because in the process he had apparently managed to undermine every general theory that has ever been applied to this case.

who might consider their primary identity as situated outside of the traditional conception of history. Indeed, it could be argued that one of the major figures associated with the view of history employed by historicist historical sociologists is E. H. Carr. In his now classic Trevelyan lectures, Carr delved behind some of the most prominent myths about both history and theory to ask an apparently simple, yet also disarmingly difficult, question: *what is history?*⁴⁰

Carr's work helps point up the cues that differentiate historicist historical sociology from the other modes that we have outlined here. In essence, the mega-macro, positivist theory-builders envisage history as 'abstracted scripture', while radical historicists and traditional historians view it as akin to a random series of isolated movements, or as 'contingent butterfly'. Thus where one fetishises general abstractions, the others fetishise the particular. The mega-macro conception relates history in which all discontinuities are ironed out through creating isomorphic transhistorical categories. Traditional history and radical historicism obscure the sense in which history is a *social process*, one in which contingent historical events, dramas and processes are part of broader interrelations, sequences, plots and concatenations which provide a shape – however difficult to discern – within historical development. For Carr, not unlike radical historicists but in clear contrast to the practice of traditional historians, the first step in studying history is to study both the historian and the broader context (the historical, social, political, economic environment) within which (s)he carries out research and within which historical facts are accumulated. Thus the fact that historical relics never speak for themselves but are embedded within broader social matrices means that there can be no absolute truth about the past in the way promoted by traditional historians. This means that historicism is closely linked to the idea of contextualism that was developed by the likes of Quentin Skinner in the 'Cambridge School'.⁴¹

Carr as well as Skinner are not the only historians who contribute to historicist historical sociology. For example, Carl Becker famously questioned the status of historical facts, seeing them as symbolic, contextual constellations made up from a thousand or more discarded events which both surrounded and sustained them.⁴² R. G. Collingwood argued that history revealed the mind of the historian, promoting a form

40. E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (London: Pelican, 1964).

41. Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). For a discussion of this in an IR context, see Duncan Bell, 'Political Theory and the Functions of Intellectual History', *Review of International Studies* 29, no. 1 (2003): 151–60.

42. Carl Becker, 'What Are Historical Facts?', *Western Political Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (1955): 327–40. On contextual constellations, see Leonard Seabrooke, 'Why Political Economy Needs Historical Sociology', *International Politics* 44, no. 4 (2007): 390–413.

of neo-Hegelian 'historical imagination' in which history became little more than the history of ideas and historical research the re-enactment of the past.⁴³ And Carr himself argued that history was a 'selective system', an inherently social process best considered as a dialogue between past and present societies. For Carr, historical explanations are inherently approximate. This does not mean the end of adequate historical explanation. Rather, the conversation between past, present and future contained within Carr's vision of historical method means that the historian's task becomes that of differentiating between significant and accidental causes, providing intelligible meaning in a world of incessant change and contestation, and remaining open to new facts, interpretations and explanations of a subject.⁴⁴ Such an understanding of history lies at the heart of historicist historical sociology.

But in the process historicist historical sociology also draws in many ways from various aspects of the other three modes. Epistemologically, historicist historical sociology stands between the constructionist mega-macro approach at one extreme and the micro approaches of deconstructionist radical historicism and traditional history at the other. *Contra* radical historicists, historicist historical sociologists accept that history is knowable but, *pace* traditional historians, they insist that traditional historians cannot claim to be speaking an objective truth insofar as history is produced within a certain time and place and subject to the interpretations of its practitioners. Moreover, further echoing radical historicists, some of these historical sociologists aim to deconstruct historical narratives on the grounds, for example, of their implicit Eurocentrism. But *contra* the new historicists, these historical sociologists then seek to *reconstruct* history along non-Eurocentric lines.⁴⁵ Echoing the mega-macro approach, historicist historical sociology seeks out general patterns of causation and development. But echoing traditional history, it also places emphasis on historical discontinuities and rejects transhistoricism. In short, this approach recognises the role of accident, contingency, agency, contextuality and particularity alongside that played by structure and continuity. Thus, if traditional historians and new historicists reify contingency, discontinuity and particularity while macro approaches reify structural continuities, this middle-ground historicism seeks to grasp all of these categories. As such, historicist historical sociology claims to be able to 'do it all'.

43. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

44. Of course, this is a task Carr performed himself, not least in his definitive accounts of the Russian revolution and its aftermath.

45. See for example Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); J. M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

The upshot of this claim is that the assumption of diametrically opposed modes of history obscures the point that historicist historical sociology can reconcile some, though by no means all, of the differences. And resolving differences where possible seems a more productive way to move forward than to insist on preserving differences through gate-keeping exercises or the policing of borders.

The Three Waves of Historical Sociology in IR?

Because elsewhere we have presented overviews of the development of historical sociology in IR (henceforth HSIR),⁴⁶ we shall provide only a potted summary here. It is possible to discern two waves of HSIR, with a third wave now in the offing. The first emerged through the writings of figures such as Michael Mann, Theda Skocpol, Anthony Giddens and Charles Tilly. However, since the mid-1990s a second wave has emerged which takes issue with neorealism (as well as the implicit neorealism that underpins the conception of the international contained in the first wave).⁴⁷

One theme that underpins the second wave concerns the objective of overcoming 'tempocentrism', something which pervades neorealist historiography. Tempocentric history takes a reified present and extrapolates this back in time to render all history amenable to transhistorical, universalist analysis.⁴⁸ Neorealists, for example, take the 'fact' of contemporary 'anarchy' and effectively extrapolate this back in time, removing the ruptures that punctuate the world-historical *longue durée*. As such, neorealist 'history without historicism' is a form of inverted path-dependency in which all actors and, indeed, the international system itself are presented as homologous or isomorphic. Thus we are told

46. For example J. M. Hobson, 'What's at Stake in "Bringing Historical Sociology back into International Relations"? Transcending "Chronofetishism" and "Tempocentrism" in International Relations', in *Historical Sociology of International Relations*, eds S. Hobden and J. M. Hobson, 3–41; J. M. Hobson, 'Historical Sociology', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of International Relations and Global Politics*, ed. Martin Griffiths (London: Routledge, 2005); George Lawson, 'The Promise of Historical Sociology in International Relations', *International Studies Review* 8, no. 3 (2006): 397–423; George Lawson, 'Historical Sociology in International Relations: Open Society, Research Programme and Vocation', *International Politics* 44, no. 4 (2007): 343–68.

47. It was, of course, deeply ironic that as IR scholars turned to historical sociologists for the means to transcend neorealism, historical sociologists began to employ neorealist understandings of the international. On this point, see Hobden, *International Relations*; Hobson, *State and International Relations*, ch. 6. See also the discussions by George Lawson, John Hobson and Fred Halliday in the forum on Michael Mann in *Millennium* 34, no. 2 (2006): 476–550.

48. Hobson, 'What's at Stake?', 9–15.

that the superpower contest between the United States and the Soviet Union finds its historical equivalent in the conflict between Athens and Sparta; that ancient imperialism is equivalent to that found in Europe from 1492 through to the 20th century;⁴⁹ or that European feudal heteronomy is equivalent in its *modus operandi* to that of the modern international system.⁵⁰ Likewise, this approach induces tempocentric statements such as the 'classic history of Thucydides is as meaningful a guide to the behavior of states today as when it was written in the fifth century BC',⁵¹ or that 'balance of power politics in much the form that we know it has been practiced over the millennia by many different types of political units, from ancient China and India, to the Greek and Italian city states, and unto our own day'.⁵² Thus terms such as sovereignty, balance of power and anarchy are employed without due regard for time and place specificity; instead they take on a stable, fixed transhistorical meaning.⁵³

The antidote that second-wave HSIR scholars provide is not so much a reversion to extreme particularity (as in traditional history) but an historicist approach which is able to construct a narrative while simultaneously being open to issues of contingency, unintended consequences, particularity and contextuality. And a further key difference between this second-wave HSIR and neorealist 'history without historicism' concerns the former's emphasis on social structure. Utilising this approach, second-wave scholars have looked to transcend the tempocentrism of neorealist historiography and first-wave HSIR by seeking to reveal the differing social contexts that inform the conduct and constitution of international relations.⁵⁴ In the process they are able to show how contemporary world politics is historically double-edged, having one foot in the past but also being in certain respects unique. And they are able to reveal how international systems and international actors change their identities and forms over time according to differing social contexts. For the most part the

49. See especially Waltz, *Theory*, ch. 2.

50. Markus Fischer, 'Feudal Europe, 800–1300: Communal Discourses and Conflictual Practices', *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 427–66. For a critique of this general move, see Lawson, 'Promise'.

51. Gilpin, *War and Change*, 7.

52. Waltz, 'Reflections', 341.

53. This is even the case in those studies which look to 'test' these concepts historically. See, for example, Stuart Kaufman, Richard Little and William Wohlforth, eds, *Balance of Power in World History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

54. In addition to the contributions to the edited volume *Historical Sociology of International Relations*, second-wave HSIR has also been showcased in various journal fora: *Review of International Political Economy* 5, no. 2 (1998): 284–361, comprising John Hobson, Hendrik Spruyt, Sandra Halperin and Martin Shaw; *International Politics* 44, no. 4 (2007): 341–449, comprising George Lawson, Roland Dannreuther and James Kennedy, Leonard Seabrooke, John Hobson and Bryan Mabee.

various ways in which this has taken place differ along ontological lines, with epistemological issues taking a secondary role within HSIR.⁵⁵

Second wavers come from a variety of theoretical schools. Marxists have explored how class relations generate diverse forms of international relations across time and place, and how these have engendered the rise of important institutions.⁵⁶ Constructivist and critical theorists have not only problematised the sovereign state,⁵⁷ but they also revealed how the changing moral purpose of the state generates distinct international institutional environments,⁵⁸ discrete forms of national identity,⁵⁹ and different relations between states more generally.⁶⁰ English school writers have focused on the changing social norms that underpin international society,⁶¹ as well as on the ways in which international systems shift along a continuum between hierarchy and anarchy.⁶² Neo-Weberians have demonstrated how varying state–society relations have promoted different international financial systems,⁶³ and have studied the ways in which forms of radical change have both constituted and been constituted by their broader relationship with the international realm.⁶⁴ In this vein, cognate work is being undertaken in ‘relational

55. And for a postmodernist critique of this emphasis, see Steve Smith, ‘Historical Sociology and International Relations Theory’, in *Historical Sociology of International Relations*, eds Hobden and Hobson, 223–43.

56. Cf. Justin Rosenberg, *The Empire of Civil Society* (London: Verso, 1994); Benno Teschke, *The Myth of 1648* (London: Verso, 2003); Craig N. Murphy, *International Organization and Industrial Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Harnes Laches, *Beyond Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2006).

57. Thomas J. Biersteker and Cynthia Weber, eds, *State Sovereignty as Social Construct* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); cf. Daniel Philpott, *Revolutions in Sovereignty* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

58. Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

59. Rodney Bruce Hall, *National Collective Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

60. Andrew Linklater, *The Transformation of Political Community* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998).

61. Gerrit W. Gong, *The Standard of ‘Civilization’ in International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984); Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Shogo Suzuki, ‘Japan’s Socialization into Janus-Faced European International Society’, *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 1 (2005): 137–64.

62. Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society* (London: Routledge, 1992).

63. Leonard Seabrooke, *The Social Sources of Financial Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

64. George Lawson, *Negotiated Revolutions* (London: Ashgate, 2005). Some elements of neo-Weberian thinking can also be found in Fred Halliday, *Revolution in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1999).

HSIR'.⁶⁵ And, last but not least, HSIR is increasingly contributing to the 'civilisational turn' in IR.⁶⁶

In its first two waves, therefore, historical sociology asserted itself as a broad movement capable of incorporating a number of paradigms and explaining a wide range of important issues in IR. Although proponents shared an understanding of the importance of discontinuity, contingency and particularity in international processes, these approaches also shared a concern for examining how social structures – in the form of relatively fixed configurations of social relations – shaped international events. As such, historical sociology offered a double punch: not just a focus on the historical details of particular dimensions of international relations, but also an emphasis on causal explanations wherever these were located, specifying how patterns, configurations and sets of social relations combined in particular contexts to determine certain outcomes. As such, second-wave historical sociologists do not just provide historical analysis, but they also generate powerful theoretical explanations.

However, in recent years a further move has begun, one with its origins in two concerns. The first is the broadness of second-wave historical sociology and, in particular, concern over whether its 'catholicism' has produced a dilution in the underlying approach.⁶⁷ This call for heightened specificity is matched by a second concern over the extent to which 'the international' itself has, as yet, failed to become a core feature of historical sociological explanations, both in IR and further afield. As such, some historical sociologists working in IR are beginning to develop a more focused approach towards illuminating the social logic of 'the international'. Justin Rosenberg, for example, has argued that the international can be theorised by virtue of the simultaneous existence of plural, but *connected*, forms of economic, political and social organisation.⁶⁸

65. See for example Patrick Jackson and Daniel Nexon, 'Relations before States: Substance, Process, and the Study of World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 3 (1999): 291–332.

66. See for example Hobson, *Eastern Origins*; J. M. Hobson, 'Is Critical Theory Always for the White West and for Western Imperialism? Beyond Westphalian towards a Post-racist Critical IR', *Review of International Studies* 33(S1) (2007): 91–116; Andrew Linklater, 'Norbert Elias, the "Civilising Process" and International Relations', *International Politics* 41 (2004): 3–35; Robbie Shilliam, 'What about Marcus Garvey?', *Review of International Studies* 32, no. 3 (2006): 379–400; P. T. Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006); Martin Hall and P. T. Jackson, eds, *Civilizational Identity* (New York: Palgrave, 2007); and see also the earlier work by Jan P. Nederveen Pieterse, *Empire and Emancipation* (London: Pluto, 1990).

67. For more on this critique, see Lawson, 'Historical Sociology in International Relations'.

68. Justin Rosenberg, 'Why Is There No International Historical Sociology?', *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006): 307–40; Justin Rosenberg, 'The Higher Bullshit: A Reply to the Globalization Theory Debate',

Indeed, the dialectical relationship between unevenness and interactivity envisages historical development itself as, if not following a path of pre-determined linearity, nevertheless exhibiting certain regularities – for example the ‘privilege of historical backwardness’ which allows societies to learn from others and leap ahead via ‘innovative fusions’ of existing technologies. By focusing on these spurts – what Giddens, Gellner and Mann call ‘neo-episodic moments’, or what William Sewell describes as ‘the conjuncture of structures’ – it is possible both to attain an explanation of the complex movement of historical processes *and* to retain broader analytical appeal.⁶⁹

Herein, we believe, lies the seed for a possible third wave of HSIR, one which presses scholars to develop a ‘theory of the international’. Given that this is something that is surprisingly lacking within the discipline of IR, we believe that by tackling this issue head-on HSIR can speak directly to the core issues of IR, thereby helping to promote a much stronger convergence of, and direct conversation between, these literatures than has been achieved hitherto.⁷⁰

Conclusion: Re-imagining IR

The question ‘What is history in IR?’ is not of importance just to historical sociologists in IR. Rather, it is one with major ramifications for the discipline as a whole. As this article has demonstrated, history does not belong to a single theoretical approach: history comes in plural modes rather than in singular form. Indeed, history is, in many ways, the lowest common denominator of the various paradigms within the discipline. Given this, it becomes particularly important to establish precisely what we mean by ‘history in IR’. In the process, we find that there is not one but four different ways of ‘doing’ history in IR. And the scholar’s choice of a particular mode of history becomes constitutive of the way in which (s)he theorises and understands international relations (as much as vice versa).

Accordingly, if we are all historians now, we are differentiated not simply by our choice of theory but also by our selection of a particular

International Politics 44, no. 4 (2007): 450–82; Justin Rosenberg, ‘Uneven and Combined Development: The Social-Relational Substratum of “the International”’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 21, no. 1 (2008): 77–112.

69. Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1964); Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence* (Cambridge: Polity, 1985); William Sewell, *Logics of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

70. See J. M. Hobson, George Lawson and Justin Rosenberg, eds, *International Historical Sociology* (forthcoming).

historical mode of explanation. Revealing these four modes of history in IR provides a hitherto obscured organising dimension of the discipline. Beyond simple binaries such as 'critical theory vs. problem-solving theory', 'British vs. American IR' or 'mainstream vs. non-mainstream theories' lies a complex network of promiscuous linkages, interactions and synergies, as well as some sharp differences, that underpin 'histories in IR'. Taking such a view necessarily complicates our conception of IR, transcending the antinomies that all too often mark the limits of the discipline's self-conception. In short, therefore, recognising a more complex picture of history in IR could both allow for more fruitful dialogue between IR scholars and enable the discipline to be re-imagined beyond some of its more obfuscatory constructs. In this way, it becomes possible both to see and to potentially transcend some of the current limits of the international imagination.

John M. Hobson is Professor, Department of Politics, University of Sheffield, and George Lawson is Lecturer, Department of International Relations, London School of Economics.
