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Historically Speaking, Volume 8, Number 2, November/December 2006,
pp. 17-18 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/hsp.2006.0025](https://doi.org/10.1353/hsp.2006.0025)



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COMMENTS ON TRACHTENBERG

Robert Jervis

Like Halévy, Marc Trachtenberg packs a great deal into a short space. There is a little to disagree with, but much to ponder, probe, and query. As a great admirer of both Trachtenberg and the field of diplomatic history, I strongly agree that it is hard to imagine international theory and international history thriving without each other. This is not to say that they will or should converge, let alone merge. Neither should there be a hard-and-fast-division of labor, especially one where historians study particular cases and political scientists draw generalizations and develop theories. Rather, while engaging in close dialogue, they make somewhat different scholarly trade-offs and embody somewhat different sensibilities. But, at least for the mainstream of both disciplines, the central task is to explain how international politics works.

Halévy's statement and Trachtenberg's discussion of it bring up several points, some of them common concerns of historians and international relations (IR) scholars and some that point to a number of the differences. To start with, it is interesting that while Trachtenberg expresses skepticism about the deterministic and static quality of Halévy's argument, the two share a perspective that illuminates current issues of interest to both historians and IR scholars. This is a focus on how much the contemporary actors know about the international scene, what theories (usually implicit) they hold about international politics, and how we explain their beliefs. Furthermore, and this has received increased attention from political scientists recently, it is not only later scholars who are doing this, but also contemporary actors. That is, we theorize about actors who themselves are theorizing.

Most generally, both Trachtenberg and the quotation from Halévy imply that the beliefs and calculations of leaders matter a great deal. This may seem obvious, but in fact denies alternative arguments, common in both history and IR, that people are moved by forces beyond their control and indeed beyond their comprehension. In this view the diplomacy of 1914, and indeed of the decade preceding the war, was epiphenomenal, and the real causes lay deeper within the states and/or the international system. Although I do not want to address this fundamental question here, I raise it because it is the perspective that informs the entirety of Halévy's essay, which focuses on collective feelings and collective forces and characterizes speculation about how different behavior in the crisis might have prevented the war as "Pills to cure an earthquake!"

This issue is perhaps unresolvable, and so it is fortunate that Halévy's wording suggests other in-

teresting questions: "everyone knew, *who chose to know* . . . it was likewise *common knowledge* . . . everyone knew, *who wished to know* . . ." If we can see it, why didn't they? And if they could understand the likely consequences of their behavior, and if the outcome was to prove unfortunate, why didn't they behave differently?



Woodrow Wilson making speech at Arlington National Cemetery, May 30, 1915. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-85701].

Let me start with the phrase "common knowledge." It has entered IR scholarship through game theory. There it means not only that both sides (assuming only two for the sake of convenience) know the same thing, but that each knows that the other knows it, and knows that the other knows that it knows it. (Saying that knowledge is common is not saying that it is correct—all the actors in 1914 "knew" that the war would be short, and knew that others knew it.) In this view, although the actors are not omniscient, they generally see quite clearly, and generally see how others see the world. This permits scholars who share this perspective to make very powerful and penetrating arguments. We can build our analysis on the assumption that statesmen could foresee, if not the specific outcomes, then at least the outlines of the others' motives and likely responses.

More historically-minded IR scholars, even those like myself who are great believers in the central insights of game theory, object that this assump-

tion simply is not realistic. In case after case that we look at (shamelessly drawing on the more thorough research of historians), we find that international politics resembles the Japanese movie *Rashomon*, in which each state, and often each individual, sees a very different reality. Since I come to IR and diplomatic history in part as a political psychologist (and I arrived at this perspective against my initial expectations after looking at a large number of cases), I expect leaders and states often to be in their own perceptual worlds, to be slow to adjust their beliefs to new information, and to have great difficulties in understanding others' outlooks.

I do not think it is only my critical view of current American foreign policy that leads me to expect the prevalence of delusions. This brings me back to the Halévy quote: "Everyone knew, who chose to know . . . everyone knew, who wished to know . . ." I completely agree, but want to call attention to what I take to be an artful ambiguity here, one that leads to very interesting questions. Contrary to what one might think at first reading, Halévy's claim is compatible with quite a bit of ignorance and error. Those who did not choose or wish to know that the war would expand as it did were free to follow their misguided beliefs to the contrary. Statesmen did indeed have to *choose* to know that the war would expand. Just as facts do not speak for themselves to scholars but require theoretical frameworks for interpretation, so statesmen need their own interpretive contexts in order to make sense of the world.

These frameworks and the beliefs that form within them are not guided entirely by reality; they are strongly influenced by the need for social adjustment and psychological well-being, needs that can be conducive to self-delusions. People who strongly want to believe things—in fact, who need to believe certain things—often can shape their analyses accordingly. Those who do not feel these psychological pressures, or who feel different ones, will not only arrive at different views, but are not likely to be able to understand how others arrived at theirs. I do not want to be too black-and-white here, in part because beliefs and perceptions often are ambivalent if not contradictory. Thus even in retrospect it is often hard to tell exactly what people believed at the time. Did German leaders really believe that the war would be short? If so, why did they need to leave the Dutch "windpipe" open? If the British leaders (other than Lord Kitchener) were so sure that the war would be over quickly, why did they so rapidly seek to cut off imports of food and other raw materials to Germany?

Politics and psychology often conspire to make people believe what they need to believe in order for them to have faith in their policies. This is necessary to give them the confidence to move forward and to persuade others to join them. My theory suggests that the main reason why the Bush administration relied on the expectation that Ahmad Chalabi could quickly stabilize Iraq and permit U.S. forces to withdraw was that this belief allowed them to proceed with the war with relatively little psychological conflict or political opposition. To take another example, John Coogan argues quite convincingly that at the start of World War I Woodrow Wilson was able to—indeed, had to—delude himself into believing that he was upholding American neutrality against the British blockade. To have seen clearly would have forced him to make an unpalatable choice between threatening Great Britain, whose defeat he believed would have been very much against the American interest, and openly rejecting the defense of neutral rights that was deeply embedded in international law and American history. Better, both politically and psychologically, to convince himself that he was not making such a choice.¹

There is a high cost to such behavior. Many choices are made implicitly rather than explicitly. Courses of action that might appear attractive upon hard and prolonged thought are never contemplated. It is often very difficult to understand which beliefs in fact drive behavior. Mediocre scholars often imagine they are smarter than decision makers, but good ones have to grapple with the fact that it is hard to reconstruct the pressures that leaders feel and must adapt to. Trachtenberg is of course correct that we are not without weapons in this struggle for understanding. We can often see which beliefs form first and which seem to be dragged along in their wake, and we can look for consistency between beliefs and actions. Silences in the documents also are diagnostic: it is telling when questions that are not only obvious in retrospect but that normally would be addressed go unexamined.

In the endeavor to understand beliefs and how they fit with behavior, political scientists are more inclined than historians to make explicit use of the comparative and hypothetico-deductive methods. There is no magic in either of them, and they are not unfamiliar to historians, although the latter often forego the labels. In its essence, the comparative method simply means seeking to establish causation by comparing several cases to see if the effect changes when the possible cause has changed. Trachtenberg often does this, and so does Ernest May in his study of American expansionism and the Spanish-American War.² The hypothetico-deductive method is less familiar, especially in its explicit form. The basic point is the importance of taking one's theory or causal argument seriously and probing it by asking what one would expect to find if the argument is correct. In other words, in addition to moving from facts to explanations, the scholar asks herself what evidence she would expect to see (aside from that which produced the hypothesis) if the hypothesis is in fact correct. This is difficult to do because it not only requires drawing out the implications of one's argument, but, even more important, putting aside what one knows happened in order to figure out what *should have* happened if the hypothesis is correct. Even though the method rarely works out neatly or without dispute, it can be powerful for pointing scholars toward important evidence and, perhaps even more, for leading them to understand the implications of the arguments they and others are making. It may seem unhistorical because it moves away from directly examining what happened, but this method is central to how we can understand the past.

A final issue combines both method and substance. This is how much consistency we expect to find in the behavior of leaders and states. In his book more than in the piece under discussion,³ Trachtenberg's analysis rests on the idea that there is a high degree of consistency in state behavior both over time and across related issues. I do not mean to

exaggerate; he does not claim that everything fits together neatly and follows a master plan. But, in a way similar to Halévy, he believes that we can do quite well by asking what motives or objectives logically link or underlie disparate acts. Using this method and a very careful reading of documents, he concludes that President Roosevelt squeezed Japan in the summer of 1941 in order to provoke it and allow the U.S. to enter the war. He may be right, and his argument is very well done. My doubts arise not because I can muster good counter-evidence, but because I think Trachtenberg may be being more logical and consistent than the decision makers. This is not to argue that leaders are less smart than scholars, but that they value consistency less and are often forced to respond to immediate (and conflicting) pressures and to improvise. Of course, showing this to be the case is difficult, and, pushed to the extreme, it would mean that general explanations, or at least many forms of explanations that stress actors' goals and strategies, become impossible. This might bother the historian less than it would the political scientist, but many in our professions have a bit of both in us.

Robert Jervis is the Adlai E. Stevenson Professor of International Affairs at Columbia University. His most recent book is System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life (Princeton University Press, 1997). He is a past president of the American Political Science Association.

¹ For more on this, see Robert Jervis, "Understanding Beliefs," *Political Psychology*, forthcoming.

² John Coogan, *The End of Neutrality: The United States, Britain, and Maritime Rights, 1899-1915* (Cornell University Press, 1981).

³ Ernest May, *American Imperialism: A Speculative Essay* (Atheneum, 1968), especially ch.1.

⁴ Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

DIPLOMATIC HISTORIANS AND THE RETURN TO THEORY

Fraser Harbutt

Thanks to Marc Trachtenberg for opening a debate about theory that also serves very usefully to show how sadly fragmented the community of scholars interested in foreign relations and international history has become. We might well include a third wayward discipline—international law—which at certain points in the early 20th century and again in the late 1930s took a leading role in the study and shaping of American diplomacy. In recent years international lawyers have detached them-

selves in their preoccupation with the clinical study of formal institutions. But I would not regard them as a lost cause

It is central to Trachtenberg's argument, with which I agree, that diplomatic history and international relations theorists are too far apart. I first encountered the problem in college when my painstaking efforts were dismissively characterized as "poetic" by a political science professor who had, I thought, an excessively robotic view of humanity.

I bear no grudge, I hasten to add, and am always quick to applaud journal editors (notably in *Political Science Quarterly* and *Diplomatic History*) who have tried over the years to bridge the gap. I have also listened patiently to the homilies of innumerable deans on the virtue of interdisciplinary work. However, the administrator's beehive scenario—the history drones doing the research, the political scientists conceptualizing the results, the lawyers elucidating the rules of the game—bears little resemblance to reality.