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Historically Speaking, Volume 8, Number 2, November/December 2006,  
pp. 20-21 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: [10.1353/hsp.2006.0014](https://doi.org/10.1353/hsp.2006.0014)



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## REJOINDER

Marc Trachtenberg

**H**ow should historians and political scientists—and above all diplomatic historians and international relations theorists—relate to each other? Some of the commentators, especially Fraser Harbutt and Robert Jervis, believe that people in both fields have a lot to gain by taking each others' work seriously. And Jervis, I think, puts his finger on perhaps the most basic reason why a productive relationship is possible when he says at the very end of his comment that many of us have a bit of both disciplines in us. Donald Kagan is a bit more reserved. He doesn't reject the idea that theory is important, but he's obviously not overenamored with contemporary international relations theory. Thucydides, he feels, offered a profound theory of what makes for war, and contemporary theorists have scarcely come up with anything better. Eliot Cohen also admires Thucydides and thinks there is a lot to be learned, more generally, from an "older school of international relations theorists"—that is, from people like Raymond Aron, Arnold Wolfers, and Martin Wight. But he doesn't think that we historians have much to learn from most of the international relations theorists we see around us today.

Many—perhaps most—historians would, I think, share Cohen's assessment. They don't have a particularly high regard for what they find in the political science literature or for international relations theory in particular. And they take it for granted that historians can get by quite well on their own—by using their common sense or by interacting with other historians—and doubt whether they have much to gain by paying attention to the political scientists and by interacting with them intellectually.

I understand that view, and I certainly wouldn't dismiss Cohen's assessment out of hand. I also find much of the literature one finds in the journals Cohen mentions "dessicated, dogmatic, and narrow" and devoid of interest. But for me that is all beside the point. Do you judge a field mainly by what you find as you trudge drearily through the journals? I don't think so. I'd hate to have the historical profession as a whole dismissed as worthless because of the kind of thing you find in the *American Historical Review*. A handful of works, in fact, can make all the difference in terms of how you feel about a particular discipline and what it gives you intellectually. So if I take a relatively positive view of the value of international relations theory, it's because of the high regard I have for a handful of scholars in that field. And I have a high regard for them because of the impact their works have had on me personally.

So let me talk a bit about my own personal experience—that is, how I came to reach the conclusions I did. I was never committed to using theory as an end in itself. I just did my work in the usual way,



Crowds of people meeting M. Maisky, Soviet ambassador, at a tank factory somewhere in Great Britain, 1942 or 1943. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USW34-000620-ZB].

and those conclusions about the value of theory took shape without any particular effort on my part. I was working on the Cold War, and I knew nuclear issues played an important role in that conflict. I wanted to understand those issues, so I started to read the main works on the subject—especially the works by Schelling and Brodie to which Cohen alludes. And I was very impressed by what I found there. It was not that I agreed with everything those writers said. But in grappling with their arguments, I think I developed a deeper understanding of how international politics works in the nuclear age. I could see that the problems people faced did not have simple or obvious solutions; I could see what the issues were, why they were important, and how they related to each other. And that for me was of enormous value when I did my historical work.

But it wasn't just that. By the time I did my work on the Cold War, having worked as a diplomatic historian for many years, I had developed a certain sense of how international politics works, a sense sharpened by a certain exposure to realist theory. Growing up in the United States during the Cold War period, I had absorbed a certain view of that conflict as natural: America was a democracy and the Soviet Union was a communist state, and the Cold War seemed to follow as a matter of course from those basic ideological differences. But applying a realist perspective I was able to free myself of that conventional view. Maybe the Soviets would have liked to communize all of Europe, but not if it meant war with America: U.S. power obviously had to be taken into account. And maybe the United

States would have liked to see democratic regimes in Eastern Europe, but not if it meant war with the USSR: for the Americans, Soviet power obviously had to be taken into account. So why then, if both sides were willing in the final analysis to live with the status quo—why then, if American and Soviet power balanced each other so completely—was there a problem? How in such circumstances could there be any risk of war?

So the realist perspective was for me a source of intellectual liberation. It helped me see why the "common sense" view I had absorbed from the larger culture was just not good enough. But it didn't provide me with any answers; it just brought the puzzle into focus—that is, it made me see that, contrary to what I had been led to believe, the Cold War was profoundly puzzling.

Could I have reached that point on my own or just by reading what other historians had written? I don't think so. I just don't think common sense would have been enough. I think I needed to be exposed to a whole body of thought. I needed to develop my own way of understanding things, in large part by reacting to what other people had to say—people, that is, who had tried to grapple with these issues on a fairly abstract level. Harbutt (quoting Theodor Mommsen) says that the historian "cannot be educated," but rather has to educate him- or herself. I think I know what he means by that, and it's true to a degree. But only to a degree: you just can't develop the necessary level of understanding essentially on your own—or at least that's been my experience, both in graduate school and in my

subsequent professional life.

To do decent historical work we need to think as deeply as we can about the issues we're concerned with, and that simply cannot be done in a vacuum. But does that mean that the historian has to study theory? Why read Kenneth Waltz, in other words, when we have Thucydides?

I have a certain sympathy with that point of view, and I do think that the traditional texts are very much worth reading. I think, in fact, that they give you the bulk of what you need—that they can take you maybe 75-80 % of the way. But that remaining 20-25 % is important, and you can get it—or at least I got it—from the more formal writings, like those of Waltz. They certainly affected the way I did my own work, if only because the overtness and directness of an argument give it a certain force that is otherwise lacking. Even the simple notion that one can distinguish between the “system level” and the “unit level” (with the implication, for the historian, that one should try to keep one's eyes on the system as a whole) had a certain impact on the way I came to approach the past, over and above what I got from reading Thucydides and other more modern writers.

To a certain extent, I absorbed the theorists' way of looking at things. They, of course, do not look at the world the way we historians do, but interacting with them—and many of them are both very smart and quite serious about the subject they're studying—is like visiting a foreign country. You spend time in France, and you get to know the French. You get to know what the world looks like through their eyes. That doesn't make you French, but it does change the way you view America and the world. My exposure to the theorists had a profound influence on the way I did my work. I was led to push the envelope a bit—to sharpen my argument, to focus more on fundamentals, to avoid talking about the details for their own sake.

Now, whether or not this was a good thing is to my mind a very important and indeed difficult question. When my book on the Cold War came out in 1999, the University of Virginia held a little symposium on it, and Stephen Schuker, one of the commentators, used Dean Acheson's famous phrase to characterize the way I had handled the Potsdam Conference of 1945. My discussion of that episode, he said, was “clearer than the truth.” And I replied that not only was he absolutely right about that, but that you *had* to write that way—that you *had* to “lean forward” a bit in emphasizing the importance of the things that really mattered—if you were to make the past comprehensible. The historians in the room were a little shocked by that comment. But I remember thinking, even at the time, that the reason I had had the courage not just to say that but to write that way was that I had been exposed to Waltz, or, more generally, to the theorists' way of doing things, and had come to the conclusion that they were on to something, and that there was value in that kind of approach.

Still, is it right to approach things that way? Jervis has his doubts. He feels that historical reality is messier than I tend to assume—that people are

less consistent, that policy is less coherent, that the picture is a lot cloudier, than I (when I write history) lead people to believe. The easy answer here is that the assumptions he is referring to are essentially instruments of analysis: I assume a degree of rationality, I assume that people know what they are doing, I assume that you can make sense of what was going on, mainly as a way of getting a handle on a problem. If those assumptions are not borne out by the evidence, well then of course they would have to be softened or abandoned. But to make that point and let it go at that would not be entirely honest, because you can't draw a sharp line between method and substance. In making those assumptions at the start, I am in effect stacking the deck a bit. I'm loading the dice in favor of a certain picture of the past in which things fit together neatly and in which people know what they are doing.

This is something I have struggled with (in part Jervis has forced me to think about this particular problem—a nice example of the positive effect interaction with the political scientists can have), and I can't say that I have come up with a totally satisfactory solution. You obviously can't do violence to the historical record, but you don't want to just throw up your hands and say you shouldn't try to make sense out of what you are studying. You have to be aware of what the risks are, on both sides, and you have to try to strike a balance. I strike it in a certain way—I lean more in one direction than other historians might—because I think understanding means bringing out what is fundamental and thus involves a certain degree of simplification. But I don't think the answer I am giving now is the really important point here. The important point is that you profit by taking this kind of issue seriously, and I at least would not have grappled with it the way I have if I hadn't been exposed to theorists like Waltz.

What does this all boil down to in terms of the advice I would give a young historian, the sort of person, in fact, that my methods book was aimed at? The

main point is that *thinking* is a lot more important in historical work than you probably have been led to believe. And the second point is that you can't do that thinking entirely on your own. It really makes sense to pay attention to what the theorists are saying—not because theories give you answers, but because they will help you see what the questions are. You shouldn't look down on the political scientists, certainly not on the best of them. If you interact with them, you will see that they are not all cut from a cookie cutter. You will be dealing with all sorts of people—serious and intelligent people, interested ultimately in the same issues you yourself are concerned with, but who approach them in all kinds of ways. I think you will find the effort worthwhile. It is certainly worth a shot.

That May 1999 discussion was taped and transcribed, and I put the transcript online: [www.polisci.ucla.edu/faculty/trachtenberg/cv/UVA%20symposium.doc](http://www.polisci.ucla.edu/faculty/trachtenberg/cv/UVA%20symposium.doc). For Schuker's comment, see page 27ff; for the reference to “clearer than truth,” see page 29; for my rejoinder on this point, see page 44.

## CALL FOR PAPERS

### The Twelfth Annual James A. Barnes Club Graduate Student Conference

will be held on Saturday, April 14, 2007 from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. at Temple University's Center City campus, 1515 Market Street in downtown Philadelphia. Proposals from graduate students for individual papers and/or panels are welcome on any topic, time period, or approach in history. The panels will include two or three paper presentations at twenty minutes each. Presentations will be followed by brief comments offered by a graduate student. History Department faculty members will serve as moderators. Prizes will be awarded to the best papers in certain categories, including Military History. Please submit a one-page proposal that outlines your original research and a current C.V. no later than Monday, January 15, 2007. The Barnes Club Conference Committee will evaluate proposals and inform participants by February 19, 2007. Final drafts of accepted papers and registration fees are due no later than March 19, 2007. Electronic submissions are required in order for papers to be considered by the prize committees.

In addition to paper presentations, the conference schedule will feature mock interviews, roundtable discussions on article and book publishing, teaching history as a career, grant writing, and research tools available to historians and graduate students. For more information about the Barnes Club Conference, please see our organization's website at <http://astro.temple.edu/~jabgrad/> or contact us at [jabconf@temple.edu](mailto:jabconf@temple.edu)

