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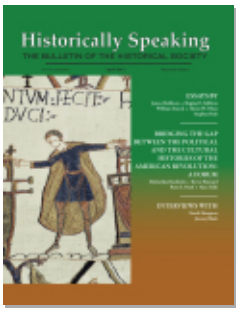

International Relations Theory and Diplomatic History

THE ROLE OF THEORY IN HISTORICAL INQUIRY HAS BEEN much debated. Comfortable with the intuitive instincts honed by long hours spent with primary documentation, many historians do their best to avoid theory. But strict avoidance of theory is impossible. British historian Mary Fulbrook, for example, argued in these pages back in November 2003 that "all historical accounts are inevitably theoretical." The issue, rather, is how best to utilize theory in historical analysis. In no subfield is this more important than in diplomatic history, which has a large body of international relations theory from which to draw. Distinguished UCLA diplomatic historian Marc Trachtenberg explores these matters in his The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method *(Princeton University Press, 2006). In the essay printed below, Trachtenberg argues that both diplomatic historians and international relations theorists could profit from talking more to each other. We asked a group of prominent international relations scholars and historians to respond to Trachtenberg, after which he supplies a rejoinder.*

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Marc Trachtenberg

A historical interpretation has to have a conceptual core. The facts—and this is a point that the distinguished philosopher of science N.R. Hanson made with great force many years ago—never really just "speak for themselves." The historian thus has to make them "speak" by drawing on a kind of theory—by drawing, that is, on a certain sense for how things work. But what does this mean in practice? What role does theory in that broad sense play in actual historical work?

In very general terms, the answer is simple: theory is above all an instrument of analysis, and, depending on what that analysis reveals, it can also serve as the basis for interpretation. But that point is very general, so let me explain what I mean by giving a specific example. It relates to a passage in an article written over seventy-five years ago by the French historian Elie Halévy, perhaps the finest historian of his generation.

Halévy in that article—it was actually one of the Rhodes lectures he gave at Oxford in 1929—summed up the origins of the First World War in a single but quite remarkable paragraph. By 1914, he wrote, Austria's leaders had come to believe that the problem of Slav nationalism could be dealt with only if Serbia were crushed militarily. "But everyone knew, who chose to know, that, whenever Austria declared war upon Serbia, Pan-Slavist sentiment would become too strong for any Russian government to resist its pressure," and "everyone knew, who chose to know, that whenever Russia gave so much as a sign of declaring war upon Austria, Pan-German feelings would compel the German government to enter the lists in its turn." "It was likewise common knowledge," he said, "that Germany, whenever she declared war upon Russia, was resolved not to tolerate the existence in the west of an army that was after all the second best army in Europe; that she would first march upon Paris and annihilate France as a military power, before rushing back to the east, and settling matters with Russia." It was also clear that in order to implement that plan, the German army felt it would have to march through Belgium. But "everybody understood that if ever the Belgian coast and the northern coast of France were to fall under the domination of Germany, Great Britain, feeling her prestige and her security in danger, would enter the war on the side of Belgium and France." What all this meant was that by 1914 war had become virtually inevitable: "everyone knew, who wished to know, not only that a European war was imminent, but what the general shape of the war would be."[1]

"The Prussian Bully invades an inoffensive Neutral Country." *Punch*, August 12, 1914.

Halévy was a truly great historian, and it is amazing how much he was able to pack into that one paragraph. A mere decade after the fighting had ended, he was able to analyze the coming of the war with Olympian detachment. He had a sense of tragedy. Events unfolded in accordance with a certain inexorable logic, and it was the historian's job not to blame one side or the other for the war, but simply to show what that logic was. But as impressive as this was, you still have to wonder about some of the points he made. Russia was bound to come to the aid of Serbia ***no matter what***, even if such a policy meant war with both Germany and Austria? Wouldn't Russia's decision depend on whether she had a good chance of winning such a war, and wouldn't that depend in large measure on whether she could count on the active military support of Britain and France? And wouldn't the western powers, for their part, have a certain interest in holding Russia back? Wouldn't they want to avoid a war if they could, because of the risks they would run and the price they might have to pay? And part of that price might be political: even total victory in such a war might not be an unalloyed blessing. Would it really be to their interest to destroy the German counterweight to Russian power in Europe? Wouldn't some kind of balance of power in Europe be much better than war? Perhaps those sorts of considerations came into play, and if so, maybe things might have developed in all kinds of different ways. And that point makes you won-

der. Wasn't there much more of a story here than Halévy had made out?

For me, having worked in this field for over forty years now, such questions come to mind quickly. Implicit in those questions is a certain view of international politics. I read the Halévy passage and think to myself: *this just can't be.* I find it hard to believe that the Russians would have gone to war for the sake of Serbia no matter what. My strong suspicion, without looking at a single document, is that their policy on this issue *had to* depend very much on their sense of what France and Britain would do. My assumption, in other words, is that power factors of that sort were *bound* to be of fundamental political importance—that European leaders *could not* simply ignore such considerations and allow their policies to be shaped essentially by Pan-Slav or Pan-German sentiment.

Those italicized terms are a tip-off. They show that an element of *necessity* has been brought into play, and thus (and this, too, was one of Hanson's major points) that a causal theory has been brought to bear on the problem. Of course, when I say these things, I'm using my terms rather loosely. There is no physical or logical impossibility here. It's not absolutely out of the question that Halévy was essentially right. So when I say to myself that power factors *had to be* more important than Halévy thought, all I really mean is that I find it very hard to believe that they did not come into play in a major way. But even bearing these caveats in mind, it's clear that in reacting to Halévy that way, I'm drawing on a kind of theory—on a rough sense of "what had to be," rooted in a general sense of how international politics works.

But note the role that that theory, if you can call it that, actually plays. It doesn't provide any ready-made answers. Instead, it serves to generate a series of specific questions you can only answer by doing empirical research. What, for example, did the Russians actually think France and Britain would do if they went to war over Serbia, and were those calculations in their minds when they decided on a course of action in July 1914? The "theory," in other words (if it is used correctly), is not a substitute for empirical analysis. It is an *engine* of analysis. It helps you see which specific questions to focus on. It helps you see how big issues (like the origins of the First World War) turn on relatively narrow problems (like what Russia calculated about Britain and France, and how that affected her behavior in the crisis). It thus helps you develop a sense for the "architecture" of the historical problem you are concerned with, and helps you see how you can go about dealing with it. It thus plays a crucial role in the development of an effective research strategy.

How does this process work in practice? As you deal with a particular historical problem, you are constantly trying to see how things fit together. You never want to interpret history as just a bunch of events strung together over time. Your goal instead is to understand the *logic* that underlies the course of events. And it's in that context that theoretical notions come into play.

Suppose, for example, you want to understand the origins of the First World War. You know that Russian policy in the Balkans is an important part of the story. Russia, of course, went to war in 1914 to protect Serbia. But what exactly *was* Russian policy in that area? How did it take shape, and why? It turns out, when you study that issue, that Russia did not pursue a purely defensive, status quo-oriented policy in that area in the years before World War I. The Russians, for example, helped set up the Balkan League in 1912. And as French prime minister Poincaré pointed out at the time, the treaty establishing the Balkan League "contained the seeds not only of a war against Turkey, but of a war against Austria as well." Given that Germany was Austria's ally, the Russians were obviously playing with fire. How then is that Russian policy to be understood?

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In dealing with that question, you need to draw on certain assumptions of a theoretical nature. Russia was too weak to take on Germany by herself. Such a course of action would have been suicidal, and you assume that power realities *had to* be taken into account. But Russia was not alone: she could count on the support of France, and perhaps of Britain as well. The attitude of the western powers was crucial, but why would they be willing to go to war for the sake of Russia's Balkan policy? The French, it turns out, had been far more cautious in that area during the early days of the Franco-Russian alliance in the 1890s. Why the shift? Didn't the answer have to do with Germany, or more precisely with the deterioration of Franco-German (and Anglo-German) relations in the decade before World War I? It stands to reason—and this is another essentially theoretical assumption—that as relations between Germany and the western powers deteriorated, Britain and France would become more dependent on Russia. They would have to worry about what Russia would do if war broke out in the west, and even in peacetime they would have to worry about the possibility of Russia mending fences with Germany if they did not give her more or less unconditional support. For similar reasons, Germany also had a certain interest in trying to wean Russia away from the western powers. And all this, the theory would suggest, would tend to put Russia in the driver's seat. It would tend to increase her freedom of action and make it possible for her to pursue a forward policy in the Balkans.

So using your "theory," you generate a series of hypotheses—about French policy, German policy, Russian policy, and British policy. Those hypotheses tell you what to look for when you start studying the sources. Did the French really feel that they had to support Russia no matter what? If so, was this a result of the way their relations with Germany had developed? Did the Russians feel that both sides were courting them, and did this have any effect on what they thought they could get away with in the Balkans? The theory, once again, does not provide you with the answers, but it does give you some sense for what the questions are—that is, for which questions should lie at the heart of the analysis.

But suppose you're able to answer those questions. Suppose, in fact, that the hypotheses that you had started out with ring true in terms of the evidence. You would then have an interpretation of what was going on. You would have been able to pull together a whole series of different things—the events leading to the deterioration of relations between Germany and the western powers, and increased Russian assertiveness in the Balkans. And that interpretation would draw on a theory—that is, on the very theory that was used to generate those hypotheses in the first place.

But that "theory"—that sense for how international politics works—is something that takes shape in your mind, more or less automatically, as you do historical work. Is that all we need, or should you also try to approach the issue in a more direct way? Political scientists and other theorists have had a lot to say about the big issues historians need to be concerned with. Does it make sense for historians to study what they have written and to try to come to terms with their arguments, or is the homegrown theory of the sort I have been alluding to so far all the historian really needs?

Many historians have a low regard for the sort of work the theorists do, just as many theorists tend to look down on historians as mere fact-mongers. I don't think that those attitudes are warranted in either case, but for now let me just say that diplomatic historians have a lot to gain by taking international relations theory seriously. First, and most obviously, there are certain basic issues that the historian needs to be able to sort out, and theoretical writings can provide important guidance. Suppose, for example, that you are studying international politics in the nuclear age. You realize you need to learn something about nuclear weapons and about the impact they have on international political life. Do they simply "cancel each other out"? Are they a force for peace or a source of instability? In coming to terms with such problems, the works of theorists like Thomas Schelling and Bernard Brodie are of absolutely fundamental importance.

So certain theoretical works can help the historian deal with particular issues. But that's not the only reason the historian should study the international relations literature. When you do historical work, you sometimes see things that you hadn't expected to see at all. You might have believed that

something was to be understood a certain way, but after immersing yourself in the subject you come to the conclusion that that episode is not to be interpreted that way at all. If the issue is important, that finding might have a real impact on your basic understanding of how international politics works.

But what makes an issue important is the way it relates to your most fundamental beliefs about the subject at hand—in the case of the diplomatic historian, beliefs about what makes for war, and what makes for a stable international system. But the importance of a particular finding will register in your mind with particular force when you've grappled directly with the fundamental conceptual issues that lie at the heart of this area of inquiry. Only then will you really see why a certain finding is surprising and therefore important. Only then will your antennae be turned on; only then will your radar screen be activated; only then will you be able to hear the alarm bells sound and understand why certain findings matter.

None of this means, of course, that historians should simply buy into the worldview of the theorists. Most of them would not be able to do that in any case, for the simple reason that the theorists just do not look at the world the same way the historians do. But it's for that very reason that you can profit enormously, if you're a historian, by going into the intellectual world of the theorist and trying to come to terms with the ideas found there. Even if you ultimately reach the conclusion that the political scientists are basically wrong on some issue, the process that led to that conclusion can be quite rewarding. And when it turns out that you yourself had been wrong, as it sometimes does, the payoff can be quite extraordinary.

So I think that we historians need to pay more attention to theory—that is, to the sorts of things that political scientists do. But I think that the theorists would be able to get a lot more out of historical work if they approached it in the right way—that is, if they understood that historical interpretation has a conceptual core, and that the historical literature is not just a great storehouse of factual material that can be drawn on for the purposes of theory-testing.

Indeed, one of the key insights to be drawn from the philosophy of science literature is that the very notion of "theory testing" is far more problematic than you might think. The problem derives from the fact that theories are not *supposed* to give as accurate a picture of reality as possible. The goal instead is to cut to the core—to simplify, to focus on what is driving things, to bring out what was really important in what is being studied. Theories therefore have to provide a kind of model—that is, a somewhat stylized view of reality. But a test consists of a comparison between what the theory implies and what observations show. If a theory is supposed to offer only a stylized picture of reality, a gap between the two is to be expected. How then can a discrepancy, even in principle, be said to falsify the theory?

Such gaps, moreover, are generally not hard to deal with. As philosophers of science have noted for over a hundred years, ad hoc explanations can easily be developed to save theories from falsification. People think that a sharp distinction can be drawn between the theoretician and the experimenter, that "the theoretician proposes" and that "the experimenter—in the name of nature—disposes." "Man proposes a system of hypotheses," as one writer put it. "Nature disposes of its truth or falsity. Man invents a scientific system, and then discovers whether or not it accords with observed fact." But things are just not that simple. Ad hoc explanations can always be put forward. "The prime target remains hopelessly elusive," the famous philosopher of science Imre Lakatos argued; "nature may shout *no*," but human ingenuity "may always be able to shout louder." And it is for that reason, he says, that in science "falsifications are somehow irrelevant."

This general claim is certainly too extreme, and testing plays a greater role in natural science than Lakatos is prepared to admit. But even though Lakatos took the argument too far, there certainly is something to what he was saying, and in fact his basic point applies with greater force to a field like international relations theory than it does to fields like physics or even biology. In international relations theory, hard-and-fast predictions are rarely made; such theories thus cannot be confirmed or falsified in a relatively simple, straightforward way, as the term "testing" implies. It is really the spirit of a theory that is being assessed—whether it gives you some real insight into how the world works, whether it helps you see things you otherwise would have been unable to see, whether it can explain things that you otherwise might find hard to understand. And the key point here is that such judgments simply cannot be made in a mechanical way. Even in a field like physics, such judgments are governed "not by logical rules but by the mature sensibility of the trained scientist." So in a field like international relations, where there is even less reason to assume that such decisions can be made in an essentially mechanical way, serious judgments have to draw on the "mature sensibility" of the trained scholar.

A wounded Serbian being carried into a Red Cross dressing station, on the front line, between 1914 and 1918. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-115010].

This is the real reason why history is important for the theorist. History is not to be thought of as a great reservoir of facts that can be gathered up like "pebbles on the beach" and drawn on for the purpose of theory-testing. It is important because by studying history the scholar can develop the kind of sensibility that makes intelligent judgment possible. Indeed, it is hard to see how a scholar *can* develop that kind of sensibility without studying history in a more or less serious way. Purely abstract analysis can only take you so far. It can sometimes take you quite far. But at some point theory has to connect up with reality. At some point, it has to help you understand something important about the real world.

So the two fields—diplomatic history and international relations theory—need to to take each other more seriously in intellectual terms than either of them has so far. I think each of them would profit enormously if they did so.

Marc Trachtenberg is professor of political science at UCLA. His most recent book is The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method *(Princeton University Press, 2006), from which this essay is drawn.*

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[1] Elie Halévy, "The World Crisis of 1914-1918: An Interpretation," first published in 1930, and republished in Elie Halévy, *The Era of Tyrannies: Essays on Socialism and War* (Allen Lane, 1967), 161-190. The paragraph in question is on page 179.