

Report on History & Theory PhD Symposium

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Rationale

History and theory are mutually constitutive. Not only are many historians theorists, but theory does not emerge in a vacuum – it arises from somewhere and someplace, and that place is history. Recent years have seen renewed interest in historically informed International Relations (IR) scholarship, as well as a turn to historical materials in the development of IR theory. Yet there is little reflection within IR about what type of history is used – and sometimes abused – by theorists.

The colloquium brought together nearly twenty PhD students (55% male; 45% female) from several disciplines studying at seven institutions in the UK and the US. All are working at the nexus of history, theory and IR. The colloquium had four main sessions: 'philosophies of history'; 'historicising theory'; 'reading theory historically'; and 'theorizing history'. Each session included a renowned scholar who specified several pre-circulated readings, gave a brief presentation, and ran the discussion. The workshop closed with a session intended to 'workshop' PhD projects in small groups led by Tarak Barkawi, George Lawson, James Morrison, and Martin Bayly.

The generous support of the CIS provided travel assistance for the attendees and several meals, including a nice dinner in London.

Session I: Kim Hutchings (Queen Mary), 'Philosophies of history'

This session encouraged students to actively consider their underlying conceptions of time and their philosophies of history. Does history have a direction? Is it cyclical? If so, what is the logic that moves history along its path(s)? To what extent are disparate historical contexts reconcilable? What is the role of various historical contexts—political, economic, linguistic—in shaping a particular time and place? How can the student of history understand a 'distant' historical moment?

These questions were engaged with reference to the work of Quentin Skinner and Michel Foucault.

Session II: Alex Anievas (Cambridge), 'Historicizing theory'

This session explored the historical nature of theory. From whence does history originate? Who creates theory and to what end do they create it? To what extent, and in what ways, is history explicable in terms of the historical context in which it is created and used? What are the benefits—to theorising—of historicising theory? What are the benefits—to history—of rescuing theory from history?

These issues were explored with reference to the work of Karl Marx and Dipesh Chakrabarty.

Session III: Julian Go (Boston University), 'Patterns of Empire'

In this session, renowned sociologist Julian Go presented his recent book *Patterns of Empire: the British and American Empires, 1688 to Present*. In addition to presenting the content of his book, Professor Go also discussed the challenges he faced in negotiating the relationship between history and theory in his study of empires. He also described, more generally, how historical sociologists tend to view the relationship between history and theory.

Session IV: Patricia Owens (Sussex), 'Reading Theory Historically'

In this session, Patricia Owens further explored the ways in which scholars can explore the historical origins and development of theory. Using some of her own work, along with that of Karuna Mantena, Owens sought to historicize the tendency towards 'sociolatry' in international theory. The key theme that came out of the session was that exploring theoretical concepts historically allows scholars to denaturalise them.

Session IV: Martin Bayly (LSE), 'Theorizing history'

In this last directed discussion, Martin Bayly showed how theories—carefully employed—can be used to problematize and reconceptualise history. Using the work of Peter Burroughs, Tony Ballantyne, and Alexander Burnes, Dr Bayly led the attendees in a re-engagement with the case of Afghanistan's history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The traditional historical narratives have been crafted—and subsequently handed down—by actors with certain political and cultural biases. The session revealed that acknowledging those biases allows one to re-examine the primary source materials with an altogether different perspective.

Session VI: PhD Student 'Workshop'

In this final session, attendees were broken up into small groups and challenged to consider the ways in which the workshop would have bearing on their research and teaching. Attendees were invited to talk with each other and with the group leaders (Tarak Barkawi, George Lawson, James Morrison, and Martin Bayly) about remaining questions and challenges.

Students were also encouraged to provide feedback on the workshop—and to exchange contact information so as to continue these interactions. One group of students at Oxford, for instance, agreed to begin convening a 'History & Theory Reading Group'.