

Report on History, Theory and the Study of World Politics

- [Rationale](#)
- [Session 1 – ‘The view from history’](#)
- [Session 2 – ‘The view from IR’](#)
- [Session 3 – ‘History, theory and the global’](#)

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Rationale

The major traditions of modern political and social thought developed through the (often coercive) clashing together of peoples, places and times. That is, ‘theory’ is itself historical, arising from specific encounters at specific times in specific places. Hegel found his masters and slaves in Haiti, just as Locke and Rousseau discovered their states of nature in the New World. Marx and Engels developed their theories amid European industrialization and festooned them with concepts like ‘the fetish’ made available by the discovery of ‘natives’. And the discipline of International Relations developed its core concepts—the state, the international system, the balance of power—from geopolitical traditions that were bound up with experiences of empire.

‘Theory’ however, purports to stand above time and place, to give meaning and significance to facts and dates, and to identify underlying, even universal, laws of motion. In this sense, the historicity of theory has been all but forgotten.

At the same time, the field of history has often eschewed generalization in favour of analyses of discrete events and contexts. Such an emphasis has reduced the status of ‘theory’ in history. Some historians reject the proposition that history should—or even could—be used to develop or ‘test’ theories. Others use theories instrumentally, employing them as background framing or guiding devices. In the case of the former, theory disappears from explicit view; in the case of the latter, theory serves as an adornment to the more substantive requirements of historical research.

This workshop sought to bring history and theory into closer conversation. From where do historians acquire the grid of concepts that organize their investigations? And from what histories and encounters do theorists develop those concepts? What is to be gained for historical and social science inquiry from greater reflexivity about the answers to these questions? We were interested not only in history and theory in the study of world politics, but of world politics and its histories as a site for the development of theoretical approaches across the social sciences.

In practical terms, the workshop was intended as a brainstorming session for the new History and Theory research group housed in the Centre for International Studies at LSE. Our discussions generated a series of topics, themes, ideas and questions that helped us frame the group’s future activities. These will include speakers, workshops and a summer school for PhDs and junior scholars.

Session 1 – ‘The view from history’

Chair: James Morrison

Discussion led by: Andrew Zimmerman, Heather Jones, Martin Bayly, Mary Morgan, Matt Watson, Campbell Craig, Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey

INTRODUCTORY

Half a century has passed since the 'Cambridge School' declared war on generalizing across distinct historical contexts. Of course, the pendulum has returned a fair amount from the extreme position staked out by Skinner in his 1969 classic 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas'. Historians are once again writing ambitious histories that march across decades. And they have never done more to bring together perspectives and sources from disparate locales.

Yet, the role of 'theory' in the study of history remains unclear. Many scholars continue to be a-theoretical or even hostile to theorising in historical writing. Others use theory promiscuously, deploying multiple theories to develop complex narratives. Both impulses, however, are a world away from the theory-building and theory-testing that dominates modern social science.

This session sought to address the following questions:

- What has been the status of theory in history? What is the status of theory in history today?
- In what ways do historians use theory to craft better histories? What are the challenges of using theory in this manner?
- To what extent do historians use history to test theory? What challenges do historians face in undertaking such an enterprise?

DISCUSSION

The discussion centred on several major questions. The first concerned the nature of 'history' both as a discipline and as an area of enquiry. The participants emphasised the variation in the different styles, modes, and subjects of history. Similarly, those approaching history differ widely in their motives. Some seek to 'use' history for some other set of purposes while others study history 'for its own sake'. The discussion underscored the importance of clarifying just what we mean by the term 'history' since, as one participant put it, there is 'no such (monolithic) thing'.

The discussion also grappled with the relationship between history and theory. Several participants pointed to instances in their own work—and in the work of others—where history was used to 'test' the veracity of competing theories. Just as many participants stressed the dangers of 'using' history in this manner. In particular, these participants feared that subordinating history to theoretical enterprises would colour—and thus undermine—the scholar's rendering of history.

There was broad agreement that theory and history increasingly exist in different spheres. The discussion then turned to the potential benefits—and likely limitations—of seeing historians engage more actively in the theory development.

Session 2 – 'The view from IR'

Chair: George Lawson

Discussion led by: Patricia Owens, Burak Kadercan, Alex Anievas, Ayse Zarakol, Meera Sabaratnam, Peter Trubowitz

INTRODUCTORY

Recent years have seen renewed interest in historically informed IR scholarship and a turn to historical materials in the development of IR theory. The rise of constructivism, the reconvening of the English School, and the re-emergence of classical realism exemplify this trend in mainstream IR. Historical sociology, post-colonial approaches, 'British School' IPE, and Marxian inspired work speak to the influence of history within critical approaches to the subject. The increasing salience of conceptual history, intellectual history, critical historiography, the history of ideas, and the philosophy of history further fuel these dynamics. To some extent, we are all historians now.

Despite this (re)turn to history, there is little reflection within IR about what type of history is used – and sometimes abused – by theorists. Indeed, relatively little work in IR is *explicitly* historical. This means that IR scholarship often fails to take seriously issues of context and temporality. At the same time, a reliance on secondary sources means that IR scholarship often regurgitates historical canards, while few researchers attend to issues of source interpretation and historical method. If we are all historians now, it does not follow that we are very good historians.

This session was intended to probe several questions:

- First, what is the best way to characterize the relationship between IR and history?
- Second, what benefits accrue from the historical (re)turn in IR and what has been suppressed, wittingly or otherwise?
- Third, how can IR contribute to a richer dialogue between history and theory? Is there any dimension to this dialogue (theoretical or empirical) where IR adds specific insights?
- Fourth, what are the challenges presented by accounts that explicitly seek to develop 'history and IR' and what challenges, in turn, are raised by such accounts?

DISCUSSION

Session 2 saw considerable self-reflection by IR scholars. Much—although not all—was critical.

Some IR scholars compared the field of IR to other fields in both the humanities and the social sciences. Several participants suggested that IR had come to suffer from having the worst of both worlds. Some IR seeks to generalise across observations and thus glosses over the (often crucial) differences between distinct cases. But as in the humanities, IR often lacks the ability to rigorously test its hypotheses using laboratory experiments.

Throughout this discussion, various participants offered narratives of the origin and progression of the field of IR. The most critical stories told of imperial impulses leading to 'an intellectually bankrupt' and 'failed' enterprise. Those who were less critical offered narratives of a field that had lost touch with some of its roots, not least archival research.

Session 3 – 'History, theory and the global'

Chair: Tarak Barkawi

Discussion led by: Kim Hutchings, Julian Go, Ayca Cubukcu, Sanjay Seth

INTRODUCTORY

For far too long the nation-state, and the image of a world of self-contained nation-states, have organized inquiry in the social sciences and humanities, most often in profoundly Eurocentric ways. Along with postcolonial critique, the theories and histories that travel under the label of 'globalization' offer one route out. Contemporary multi-archival 'global' history offers another. But is 'globalization' a suite of concepts, a period of history, or both together? How does making connections between times and places in the manner of multi-archival history amount to a theory or an explanation, much less an account of world politics? And how can multi-archival history avoid the diabolical trade-offs between depth and coverage at global scale? More generally, does the image of an interconnected world offer the basis for an answer to Fernando Coronil's call for nonimperial, non-Occidental geohistorical categories?

DISCUSSION

Session 3 included discussion on the specific topics raised above and some carryovers from the previous sessions.

Most importantly, this session raised the importance of studying the 'history of theory'—meaning the origins and development of specific theories, theoretical concepts, and terms. This became a powerful critique of any notion that theories 'exist out there', waiting to be deployed (unproblematically).

More generally, the discussion problematized the 'and' in the formulation 'theory and history'. The participants raised distinct possibilities for the 'connections' to be made between IR and theory.

Finally, this discussion emphasised the importance of thinking explicitly about our 'philosophies of history'. One participant highlighted the ways in which IR thinking is 'frozen in time', using concepts and categories created decades ago, during the Cold War. We need to think about what changes and what *could* change.