

# How Should We Study the History of International Thought?

Written by Lucian M. Ashworth

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LUCIAN M. ASHWORTH, JUN 20 2014

*'history is a bag of tricks which the dead have played upon historians'*  
Lynn White, Jr.

*'Man has no nature, just history'*  
José Ortega y Gasset

One of the conclusions of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* is that empirical studies and complex models of the present or the recent past cannot capture the full complexity of human society. To understand patterns and underlying structures, there is no substitute for longer historical studies (Piketty, 2014: 574-5). Here, he goes over ground already covered by the economic historian Charles Kindleberger, who, in 1990, went even further when he wrote that 'history is useful for its insistence on change rather than its aid in guiding or predicting it' (Kindleberger, 1990: 7). Like modern Economics, International Relations (IR) prefers its theories and models to be contemporary. If the past is given a role at all, it is merely as a means of testing current models and theories. IR's relationship to history has, on aggregate, changed little from Morton Kaplan's view that history was the laboratory in which IR tested its theories (Kaplan, 1957: 19). At first glance, it might seem that Kaplan's judgement privileges history. Closer inspection shows that it does not. Kaplan's view places IR models at the centre of analysis, and then mines historical data as a means of testing those models. History is reduced to a fixed second-order form of knowledge that is assumed to be easily known, understood, and used. The 'facts' of history are left as unproblematic evidence, while historical methods and the complexities of the philosophy of history are ignored entirely. Going back to Piketty and Kindleberger, we can see that Kaplan (and, by implication, much of IR) misses the key lesson of a more historically grounded approach: the emphasis on unstable change, complexity, and the grounding of specific models and theories in time.

The problem is that History is not easily known. If this were the case, we would not need university departments of History, and new books on historical events or periods would be scarce and repetitive. Few events in the twentieth century have been as picked over by historians as the causes of the First World War, and few are as well documented, yet, over the last few years, several new analyses of the causes have appeared on bookshelves, with Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers* (Clark, 2013) presenting a particularly challenging revisionist interpretation. All good history is revisionist history that presents us with a new way of telling the story and, as a result, historical knowledge is a poor means for objectively testing theories. In fact, historical knowledge is part of the problem of interpretation, not an easily invoked solution.

Yet, historical analysis does have something very useful to tell us in IR, but it is knowledge that requires hard work and an openness to historiographical methods. The ideas, thinkers, theories, and models that make up the sum of IR knowledge are themselves historical actors and artifacts. Rather than things that can be tested by historical evidence, they are instead an integral part of multiple historical narratives. This is the theme of my recent book on the history of international thought (Ashworth, 2014). By understanding IR and international thought as historical artifacts, we can better understand the nature of theorising the international. I would like to concentrate on two particularly useful methods for developing a better historical understanding of international thought. These are Peter

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Galison's approach to the history of science, and Mark Bevir's concept of traditions.

## Subcultures and Traditions

Peter Galison writes on the history of science, but his work has been adapted for understanding the social sciences, in general, (Isaac, 2009) and IR, in particular (Bell, 2009; Ashworth, 2012). His main argument is that we can best understand the history of science by seeing any field as divided-up into 'subcultures'. These are communities of scholars who share a common intellectual language, are in regular contact with each other, and exchange their research in common venues. Subcultures are not self-contained communities of knowledge and often need to engage with other subcultures in order to properly do their research. As a result, they develop means to communicate with other subcultures through 'trading zones' (venues where research from different groups can be shared), using an intellectual 'pidgin' language to communicate. Pidgins frequently become a new intellectual language, and trading zones can change into a subculture over time (Galison, 1997).

The importance of Galison's anthropological approach to science is that it leads us to investigate ideas as part of historical communities of scholars (current IR scholarship comes close to this in our concept of specific 'schools', such as 'the Copenhagen School'). He also gives us the tools to understand how ideas rise and fall by examining the dynamics of a scholarly community. Thus, for example, a subculture may decline if it is unable to recruit younger researchers. Different subcultures may also favour different outlets for research, so Galison's approach can help us gauge what forms of research need to be evaluated when we examine a particular group of scholars. Given that the research of a subculture of scholars needs to be understood within the context of the dynamics of the group itself, archival research into personal papers, policy documents, and other unpublished sources becomes crucial to a full understanding of the ideas they produce. It is through archival research, for example, that we can see that the enthusiasm for the League amongst many British international experts during the 1920s was not a product of idealist optimism, but rather a deeply pessimistic view of the prospects for international affairs. The archives show us this, but published books (written for a different audience) do not. Thus, to understand ideas, we must understand the form of the scholarly community that created it.

A different cut into the same problem is taken by Mark Bevir, who has reinterpreted the concept of tradition. Intellectual traditions, for Bevir, are the initial influences on people that do not necessarily fully define a scholar's work, but act as an intellectual inheritance that shapes future research (including, even, a deliberate later-in-life rejection of that inheritance). Traditions, like subcultures, are porous, and scholars are often influenced by more than one tradition. For Bevir, the interaction between traditions and new beliefs that contradict this inherited tradition creates dilemmas; and it is the working out of these dilemmas by scholars that leads to intellectual change (Bevir, 1999). Crucially for Bevir, traditions are not (like paradigms) something that we anachronistically impose on the past, but self-identifications by the scholars themselves.

Bevir's concept of traditions has been used by Ian Hall to explore British international thought between 1945 and 1975, where he charts how five broad (and interacting) British traditions interacted with changing perceptions of international affairs to create the dilemmas that dominated the development of British IR (Hall, 2012). The value of Bevir's reconceptualization of traditions is that it focuses on how individual scholars adjust both to their intellectual inheritance from the past, and to the changing interpretations of the world around them.

## Opening History's Bag of Tricks

In their different ways, Galison and Bevir help us to place scientific theory within a broader historical context. Galison's conception of subcultures allows us to recreate the historical community that produced a particular scientific approach, and also to explain the social contexts within a scientific community that leads to change in theoretical outlooks. Bevir broadens our understanding by concentrating on inter-generational traditions of thought that help us to grasp both the continuation of ideas and the challenges that emerge through dilemmas. Both guard us against judging theories as right or wrong (although we are not precluded from making our own judgements here), but rather allow us to explore the multiplicity of factors (mostly non-rational) that lead to both continuity and change in international thought.

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Both also lead to a fundamentally narrative understanding of science and scientific change. Subcultures and traditions have complex stories embedded in their time and place, and the theories they develop are products of those stories. Thus, to fully understand a theory, we must first appreciate the historical narratives that produced, nurtured, altered, and (often) eclipsed it. Sometimes these narratives will include rational scholarly debate, but they can equally include the non-rational, such as institutional structures, the interpretation of particular events, cultural inheritances, and even clashes of personality. The story of western geopolitics, for example, emerges out of scientific traditions in the nineteenth century, develops through specific national and international institutions, matures through scholarly contacts, and finally succumbs to toxic personality clashes, interpretations of external events, and a sea-change in the way that scholars approached geography from the 1950s (see Ashworth, 2013). Geopolitics was both a creation of a moment in space and time, and a shaper of historical events as its insights influenced policy-makers and the general public. History cannot test whether geopolitics was right or wrong, but a historical narrative on geopolitics can explain why geopolitics developed the way that it did, and it can also offer explanations for why it both flourished and ultimately failed.

The history of international thought can also help explain how, in terms of theories and approaches, we got to where we are today. In this sense, we need to get away from the pseudo-Hegelian 'Great Debate' myth – where theories in IR are seen as tested in rational debates and in their fit to world events. The 'Great Debates' narrative assumes that historical experience and rationality somehow help the fittest and most apt theories to survive. An approach is held up as having a right to exist due to some supposed victory in a debate that usually never even happened. Historical survival is not, by itself, an argument for the rational strength of an approach to IR, any more than the victory of a particular political faction in the past is proof of the rationality of its political programme. Rather, an historical analysis of the rise and fall of ideas in IR shows a messy, often idiosyncratic, and capricious process of multiple causes, ironies, and dilemmas (see Ashworth, 2014). In this sense, theories of IR are no different from other historical phenomena. To understand history is to realise that it is not a laboratory, but rather a bag of tricks waiting to ensnare the naive.

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