History
[in International Political Sociology]

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History

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All social inquiry is historical in the sense that it in one way or another engages with that which comes before the present moment. Even prognostication looks to the past to establish likely patterns for the future. Thus, to an extent, all methods are in a sense historical. Many social scientists nevertheless ignore the inherent historical dimension of their research, and unfortunately cut themselves off from the sophisticated tools and approaches developed by historians. This poses several problems to social scientists, for even if there might be no unitary historical method as such, historians have developed a number of general tools for discussing source material of different kinds. International Relations (IR) scholars would greatly benefit from acquiring at least the rudimentary of this form of production of knowledge.

Among non-historians, historical research is traditionally associated with ideographic rather than nomothetic knowledge, but engagement with the social and natural sciences has led to tone down this rather artificial boundary. More specifically, historians have used all kinds of methodologies and methods inspired by social and human sciences to approach the past. Thus there is no specific methodology or method necessarily associated with history, and there should be none associated with historical inquiry in an international political sociology: there is room for large-N quantitative studies, macro-narratives or micro-sociological studies of specific research questions. The chapters on cognate fields and other methodologies in this volume will thus all speak to the content of this chapter. Even so, we believe that there is room for improvement in how IR scholars in general and scholars engaged in an international political sociology more specifically approach history. In short, we suggest that the (meta)sociological awareness shown in studies of the near past should be applied with equal vigour to the more distant past. In this chapter we will make this case with a particular emphasis on how to deal with sources.

We do not believe that history offers a panacea for any ills suffered by IR or an international political sociology; neither the 'historical record' nor historical methods provide simple solutions. However, we also reject the view often held by historians that scholars outside of the discipline of history can never produce adequate historical understandings. Historians often complain that social scientists treat history as a quarry, mining only the parts which are of interest to them and ignoring the rest. Although this is often a precise assertion, it boils down to a complaint that social scientists are not historians.

Our ambition is not for scholars engaged in an international political sociology to become historians. Rather, our hope is that they should strive to achieve a historical sensibility and think through how they approach source material in general. Doing this, we believe, would increase consciousness about the precariousness and haphazardness of our knowledge about history, enable a more sociologically informed reading of history and highlight the contingency of historical developments.

Our discussion of historical methodology follows in two steps. First, we present relatively briefly the relationship between history and some the methodology behind an international political sociology. Second, we delve more deeply into what we perceive to be the key feature of historical methods: the sustained debate about how to deal with sources. Here we include both a plea for engagement with primary sources and some practical advice on how to do so without necessarily turning into junior historians. By way of conclusion we make the case for an ongoing conversation – rather than conversion – between an international political sociology and history.

History as a methodology for an international political sociology

There are many different ways of doing historical research, and just as many different ways of doing historical IR/historical international sociology, as laid out by Hobson and Lawson (2008), from the non-historicist historical macro-analyses of researchers such as Douglass North to the radical historicism often associated with Derrida. Although there have been debates, sometimes fierce, over what counts as 'proper' historical research, and what the differences are between history and cognate disciplines, we agree with Tuchman (1998 : 256, note 2) that such debate tends to be "more useful to people who wish to draw boundaries between sociology and history than they are to people who have questions they wish to answer".

We also agree with Suganami (2008) and Lawson (2012) who with somewhat different starting points argue that the differences between IR and history should be seen as differences of degree rather than of kind. Furthermore, the two disciplines have been exposed to parallel 'waves' and 'turns' over the last half-century – quantification and statistics, rational choice and post-structuralism have all influenced both, albeit with differences in timing, extent of influence and geographical scope of such influence. Since IR grew partly out of history, and since the two disciplines have gone through parallel fads, most of the methods applied by historians will be recognizable to any scholars. Indeed, the 'classical approach', defended by Bull (1966), bears a strong resemblance to systematic historical research. Likewise, Wight (1960) famously argued that there could be no actual international theory, and the best that international theory could do was to present a philosophy of history.

Even if the disciplines have been exposed to the same kinds of 'waves' and fads of method and methodology, it should be noted that historians have typically been less explicit about methods than their IR counterparts. In a sense, at least in the Anglo-American tradition, historical methods have been the name given to any methods pursued by historians, and discussions have been more centred on questions of overall methodology and the philosophy of history, such as in E. H. Carr's (1961) *What Is History?*, than specific methods. It thus makes good sense that the chapter on historical methods in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (Quirk 2008) deals with a number of different ways in which IR has engaged with history, but not with the nuts and bolts of methods as such (but see Howell and Prevenier 2001 for a useful technical introduction to sources and source criticism in English, and Moses and Knutsen 2012 for a shorter introduction written for social scientists). To an outsider, history is nevertheless recognizable by what amounts to a fetish for sources, and in particular archival sources. In the German and Scandinavian historical traditions, the question of how to evaluate and relate to sources has been elevated to the core of historical methods (Lorenz 2001; Hjørland 2008).

While all methods are historical in the sense that they deal with the past, there is necessarily a difference between methods dealing with the living (either through first-hand experience or through interviews) and methods dealing with the dead. Depending on the theoretical approach, however, dealing with the dead may be a difference in degrees to some, while it may represent a more substantial challenge to others. Rational choice and quantitative approaches, for instance, can be applied to data going back centuries just as well as current data. Discourse analysis is equally agnostic as to the time period under study, while genealogy is usually compelled to look back beyond living experience. For other approaches, however, such as ethnography and the study of practice, moving beyond the realm of the living poses more of a challenge; if you are studying what is (in practice) observable, the study of what can no longer be observed must necessarily involve some reflection about how to translate from the realm of the dead to that of the living. The latter approaches, we hold, stand to gain from a better understanding of how historians deal with their sources.

The challenge of the sources

An important reminder must be mentioned at the outset, namely that the status of historical data varies enormously across disciplines, as well as within the historical discipline itself, according to ontological and epistemological core wagers. This has obvious implications for how one can approach data, and which methods will yield relevant results. These differences should be well known to IR scholars. At one extreme, some IR scholars, as well as some historical sociologists, approach history as a way of testing hypotheses, or as a field in which to apply their models. Implicit here is an understanding of history where 'truth' can be ascertained, and where true facts are slotted into models, a 'non-historicist' usage of history (Hobson and Lawson 2008: 420). At the other extreme, deconstructionist histories might question all data, insisting that there is nothing but narrative. The discipline of history can largely be found in between these two extremes, but tilting towards the latter end. Few, if any, historians would accept the possibility of a non-historicized 'truth' being available to researchers. As pointed out by Hobson and Lawson (2008), although the differences spring from serious disagreements over the status of knowledge and 'truth', research practices among different historians are not all that different. Writers drawing on post-structural insights deal with primary sources in ways similar to what traditional historians do (as reflected in Foucault's ([1971] 1998 : 369) assertion that genealogy is "grey, meticulous, and patiently documentary"), and their narratives, if not 'grand', are certainly trying to establish some sort of pattern from the available data. In our discussion of sources, we will base our comments on the parallels in usage rather than on the underlying meta-theoretical differences.

But what counts as a source? Briefly told, something becomes a source when someone asks a question involving it. Thus, on the one hand, sources do not speak for themselves, while on the other hand, anything can in principle be utilized as a source. Sources need not be human-made; when using tree-ring dating (dendrochronology) to study historical climatology, the sources are living and dead trees. However, the vast majority of sources which interest historians and social scientists are the result of human activity. Within the possible universe of sources, historians have developed sophisticated systems of cataloguing and criticism. The emphasis on sources dates back to Leopold von Ranke, often considered the founder of modern history, who wanted to use exact knowledge of sources to lead to an appreciation of history 'as it really happened'. While few if any historians today believe in the possibility of getting to one 'truth' about the past (Smith 1999 ; Finney 2001), detailed discussion of sources remains a key feature of the discipline. Particular attention has been paid to establishing provenance (the when, where, how and by whom of sources) and authenticity. While these are indeed important questions any researcher should not shy away from, historians are usually better armed with their specialized knowledge to deal with them. IR scholars usually need only concern themselves with questions of provenance if they are engaging sources which historians have not utilized.

Of higher relevance to most IR scholars will be the different ways in which sources can be classified, and what inferences can be drawn from different types of sources. Within the larger universe of human-made sources, it is common to distinguish between artefacts/remains/relics on the one hand and testimonies/narratives on the other. Remains are often referred to as 'silent' sources; they tell us something about their conditions of production and existence, but in principle nothing more. Archaeological finds of remnants of longhouses in Newfoundland in the 1960s established a Viking presence in North America 500 years before Columbus, but these finds alone could not put Viking presence into a wider narrative. However, even if 'silent' remains often spur the imagination, and help raise questions. While in principle 'silent', they tend to suggest stories, and from a post-structural perspective it could obviously be suggested that remains can be read as text (see Neumann 2008). Even if there had been no narrative sources about Vikings in North America, the archaeological finds would have led to speculation of where they came from, why they came and so forth. Typically both historians and social scientists have preferred narrative sources to relics, but the current turn to (new) materialism should also lead to an interest in relics of a current kind, such as the passport, the flag or the container (see Salter 2015).

Turning to narratives, these are sources which refer to something beyond their condition of production; they are 'speaking' sources. Texts have been the prototypical narrative sources, but different visual and audial representations have been treated as narrative sources, and such sources are becoming increasingly important. It should be stressed that the distinction between remains and narratives refers to the use of the source. Non-narrative sources can only be used as remains. Narrative sources can on the other hand be used both as remains and as narrative: they can tell us something about their origin, but also about what the narrative is about. The distinction between utilizing a text as remain and as narrative should resonate with scholars trained in analyzing discourse, where texts (widely understood) are typically not read for their narrative content but with the purpose of discovering discursive patterns.

Typically, when treated as narratives proper, narrative sources are divided into three kinds (Howell and Prevenier 2001). 'Literary' sources are sources with a message, explicitly telling a story. The purpose of this story can be extremely varied. Examples of such sources are newspaper articles, diaries, academic conference papers, epistolary correspondence, novels and so forth. Of a more technical kind are sources referred to as diplomatic (in the sense of dealing with 'diplomas') or judicial. These are documents dealing with legal situations, and were traditionally seen as the 'best' kind of source by historians, since they are typically produced as some sort of evidence or proof. Examples of such sources are court records, treaties, laws, wills and contracts. Finally, the third kind of narrative source are sources known as social documents. These are the records created by bureaucracies and organizations of all kinds, the stuff typically produced by government officials, ministries, bureaucracies and civil society associations.

One further distinction is of particular importance when dealing with narrative sources, namely the one between primary and secondary sources. We will spend a little more time discussing them both in some more detail. A primary source is what can be defined as the first available information about something, like a letter or a parliamentary record. A secondary source is a source which refers to other sources.[2] However, even if the distinction between primary and secondary sources refers logically to a sequence, the same source can be used as in both a primary and a secondary way, depending on what kind of question we ask of it. Thus, Graham Allison's

Essence of Decision (1971) is a primary source to knowledge of the model of bureaucratic politics in the study of foreign policy, but a secondary (or even further derived) source to the history of the Cuban missile crisis.

There has been some debate within International Relations about which sources should be used, with some arguing that International Relations scholars have to rely on secondary sources and stand on the shoulders of the historians, while others have argued in favour of IR scholars doing primary historical research themselves (see Levy 200 ; Larson 2001). Both kinds of research come with specifi c challenges, which we detail, but we would also like to emphasize some of the benefits of at least attempting to deal directly with primary sources.[3]

Primary narrative sources come in many shapes and forms, and IR scholars are typically relatively accustomed to dealing with such examples as newspaper articles and parliamentary records. However, as sources these are not unproblematic. Newspapers aim to sell, and parliamentarians to impress their voters. If one is analyzing discourse, this is not necessarily a problem (but still something to recognize as one is trying to tease out different representations), but if one is trying to establish how something happened, it might cause more trouble. Historians thus typically prefer sources which have a documentary character rather than being produced for an audience and/or for posterity, sources typically found in archives (see Lobo-Guerrero and van 't Groenewout in this volume). Thus, even scholars relying solely on secondary sources should know a little about archives. Exposure to the practice of archival research should sensitize to the practice of how archival histories are created, and to the very materiality of archives. Even Foucault-inspired scholars, used to working with a *notion* of 'the archive', would benefit to do research in an *actual* archive, as Foucault himself did. The enormity of most archives illustrates in practice how selective any archive-based history must by necessity be. Archival historians are constrained not only by ideological bias, methodological perspective and the questions they choose to raise, but also quite physically by the sheer number of potential sources. "The archive is an excess of meaning" (Farge 2013: 31). Furthermore, archives offer insight into the practice of remembrance, as the creation of archives tells us not only that something was considered worthy of being remembered, but also they ways in which they were catalogued for future reference. Thus, archives provide one way of accessing the notoriously difficult category of historical (and to us usually unobservable) practice. We are, however, not suggesting that archives give a privileged insight, simply that they provide a different kind of insight from that given by secondary sources: "The archives do not necessarily tell the truth, but, as Michel Foucault would say, they tell of the truth" (Farge 2013: 29). When studying practice, documentary and contemporary first-hand sources are particularly important. Even if practice itself is not observable, manuals for training and regulations will suggest what was considered appropriate practice, while the physical appearance of documents will hold important clues to bureaucratic practice and court documents provide glimpses of recorded practice within the sphere of the law.

Until relatively recently, researching both archival sources and primary textual sources was extremely cost-intensive. Going on an unspecified search to archives in foreign countries implied potentially spending months abroad, while unless attached to a well-connected library, primary written sources might be simply unavailable. Technological developments have made some of these obstacles much lower, and more researchers should challenge them. As to archives, increasingly, catalogues and many other resources are available online, enabling both sophisticated searches and ordering of items. Thus, one can arrive at an archive with relevant materials already stacked at one's desk. Furthermore, cheap high-resolution camera technology now implies that time at an archive can be spent at reading, photographing and further in-depth searches rather than at copying down relevant sources. All told, archival research, while still offering the unique experience of immersion into a completely different world, is now something which historically inclined IR researchers should yearn for rather than strive to avoid. For primary printed sources, the situation is even better. Many countries provide national gateways and/or databases for research into historical sources (such as Gallica in the French case), and even more sources are available behind relatively modest paywalls. Furthermore, Google Books (but also sources like archive.org or Gutenberg and Project Runeberg) provide previously unheard of access to books and other written material. This treasure trove is, as of yet, little utilized by IR scholars.

However, the flood of new sources in digital format leads to new questions of selection bias. We can never fully know if the available sources are skewed in one way or another, for example if prejudices of libraries and librarians have made some titles more available than others, or if accidents in coding (e.g. of dates or titles of publications) have excluded relevant sources. In general, reliance on digitized sources risks perpetuating Eurocentrism and reification of the canon (or the creation of a new canon), simply because Western libraries and archives, with Western sources, are able to afford the process of making material available. There is always a risk that databases might lead to an unwarranted homogenization of texts and other sources, and that a new canon might arise, based on digital searchability. On the positive side, however, researchers with limited means are now able to research many more sources than before, and the sheer magnitude of published material will tend to lead to new discoveries, and possibly also challenges to the canon.

From a more methodological perspective, at the level of individual texts, in particular for older texts, machine-coding of text can be unreliable, leading to false negatives in searches, and a certain level of historical conceptual and etymological proficiency might be necessary to be able to make sensible searches. Furthermore, reliance on searches for specific phrases might lead to a phenomenon close to the reading of books by index – a focus on snippets of text rather than a broader understanding and thus reproduce the idea that historical material is only here to do a nomothetic-inspired hypothesis testing exercise rather than participate to its idiographic development. In general, digital sources must be treated with the same skepticism as any other sources from the past, with the added layer of contemporary technical challenges.

Why bother?

At this point, the question of why is typically raised: why bother with primary sources when historians are obviously better trained to handle them? Earlier we suggested that the immersion in an archive might have a function in and of itself, and might make social science more attuned to lived life, as suggested by Robert Darnton (2014: 55) when referring to the cooperation between Michel Foucault and Arlette Farge: “By exposure to the archives, Foucault modified his overly schematic view of modern society. By exposure to Foucault, Farge enlarged a vision trapped within irreducibly peculiar cases”. But there are further reasons as well. Engaging with primary sources should encourage contemplation about which sources have survived, and which one should consult (and, by extension, how historians have picked sources). As social scientists, we are also likely to ask different questions of the sources than what the historians do, and perhaps also being interested in different kinds of sources.

Turning to secondary sources, there are additional challenges. IR scholars tend to forget that historians come with theoretical and methodological perspectives, and write as part of ongoing conversations within their own field. This often implies overlooking the active interpretation of data conducted by historians, as well as the choices that they have necessarily made about which sources to consult or not and which data to include or ignore. Furthermore, to the potential bias by the historians must be added the problem of selection by the IR scholars. Due to lack of knowledge of the field, it is easy to fall into the trap of unwittingly consulting just one scholarly tradition, particularly if that tradition seems to conform to the IR scholar's own proclivities. This challenge is particularly acute, since some within IR believe in a form of Rankean notion of history, looking to history for 'evidence' (see Thomson 1994; Wohlforth et al. 2007). The skepticism with which current data is met is somehow suspended when dealing with the more distant past. In a sense, the traditional International Relations approach to 'doing' history might imply mining long-abandoned quarries, looking to history for a certainty which historians have rejected again and again.

In our opinion, an international political sociology should be in a prime position to counter the challenges of selectivity, reading for confirmation and belief in an unproblematic 'truth'. Recalling that the discussions within the sociology of knowledge about the relationship between the knower and the known must necessarily also apply to the knowledge of historians should sensitize against simple and uncritical reliance on a single source or a single tradition, and to the questioning of how knowledge has been attained. When relying on secondary sources, researchers are in a sense one step beyond Anthony Giddens' "double hermeneutics" (see Guzzini 2000). On top of the construction of social reality by the historian and the social construction of knowledge within history, is added yet another layer of social construction of knowledge within IR. While there is no avoiding this distance between the researcher and the sources when using secondary sources, IR scholarship would profit immediately by simply recognizing this distance and widening the scope of their research accordingly, while simultaneously reducing the truth-claims often made.

A brief example should illustrate the relevance of thinking through the quality of different sources and the importance of both consulting primary sources and knowing something about the historiographical position of secondary sources, while reflecting on the continuous social construction of knowledge.[4] Within the discipline of IR, '1648' (and/or 'Westphalia') has been one of the foundational myths, signifying the birth of the modern state, state sovereignty and the modern state system.[5] Often this is referenced without any citation at all; the signifiers have become self-explanatory shorthand. When reference is made, it is most often to a fairly recent general IR-text. This text might in turn reference some more specialized study, but eventually reference is usually made to a 1948 text by Leo Gross, who worked on international law rather than history. Gross (1948) makes reference to the peace treaties of Westphalia, and his text qualifies as a secondary source to them. Most IR texts referring to 1648 or Westphalia are on the other hand tertiary (or even further removed) sources to the actual content of the treaties. And a number of important things are usually lost in this movement, such as there being two peace treaties of Westphalia, with somewhat different content, and that the treaties concerned the Holy Roman Empire and not Europe as such. Of more importance is how Gross is a bad secondary source, largely ignoring the text of the treaties, asserting instead their historical meaning based on their posterior importance. In IR, Gross's claims have then been interpreted as the actual content of the treaties (Osiander 2001). Current IR scholars and Gross share the same problem of not knowing the other secondary sources well enough, leading to the claim that since the treaties of Westphalia have been discussed so much that they must have been very important. However, these discussions were part of political propaganda in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, propaganda where the actual content and importance of the treaties was secondary at best. While Gross knew the primary sources, he largely chose to ignore them. And very few IR scholars have actually read the treaties. Had they done so, they would have discovered that far from establishing sovereignty, the term is not mentioned in the texts at all. Had they engaged the historiography about early modern treaties, they would also have discovered

> the Treaties of Westphalia do not tell a clear-cut and neat story of transformation. Rather, they are better understood within a very complex story of advances,

> setbacks and messy entanglements of feudal suzerainty with some rare elements of what we now call modern state sovereignty. (de Carvalho, Leira and Hobson 2011: 741)

Given the centrality of 1648 to the narrative of International Relations, it is somewhat disheartening that the whole myth is based on wishful thinking and ignorance of the relevant sources. On the other hand, this example also demonstrates vividly the benefits of actually engaging sources more broadly and deeply.

It is our strongly held belief that the methodological impetus behind an international political sociology and history would mutually gain from engaging one another. They possess enough similarities for mutually intelligible conversations to arise, yet different enough for there to be productive tension. We nevertheless believe that there is a need for a much more thoroughgoing reflection among IR scholars doing historical work, about how to deal with different kinds of sources, and what sorts of claims should be made on the basis of them. Scholars engaging in an international political sociology, and hopefully thus with an appreciation of the sociology of knowledge, should be well equipped to handle this challenge. We realize that when engaging with history, most IR scholars, most of the time, will rely primarily on secondary sources. Nevertheless, we have suggested here that engagement with primary sources need not be an insurmountable task in our increasingly digitized world, and that it could provide valuable benefits for historical research within IR by increasing awareness of the randomness and precariousness of historical knowledge and the contingency of both history and our knowledge about it. Finally, we would like to stress that we are suggesting conversation, not conversion. There is no sense among IR scholars to attempt to outdo historians, even if they occasionally might benefit from borrowing from the historians' toolbox, rather than simply picking up random snippets from their abandoned quarries. IR scholars however will, in a sense, remain amateurs when dealing with history (Leira 2015). Our hope is nevertheless that their amateurism will be defined by their pursuit of historical study for their love of it, and not by their handling of historical data.

Notes

1 We would like to thank Morten Skumsrud Andersen, Xavier Guillaume, Iver B. Neumann and Einar Wigen for helpful comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

2 This distinction should not be confused with the distinction between first-hand and second-hand sources, where the first refers to sources where the author was present.

3 Thies (2002) provides a more detailed recipe for dealing with both primary and secondary sources.

4 This section is largely based on de Carvalho, Leira and Hobson (2011).

5 It should be noted too, that as such, 1648 has been one of the key benchmarks in IR's periodization of the past. Within history, too, periodization figures prominently as a way to categorize past events in an effort to make sense of them historically. Often organized in triads, historical context was first and foremost epochal. This has also come under criticism, and the central place of periodization in historical method need not become a key component of IR (see de Carvalho, Leira and Hobson 2011).

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