

The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method
Roundtable Review



Reviewed Works:

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Review by Petra Goedde, Temple University

Historians charged with the task of teaching a research seminar in international history should greet the appearance of Marc Trachtenberg's *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* with enthusiasm. The book, as the author states in his first sentence, 'is a practical guide to the historical study of international politics—a guide to how historical work in this area can actually be done, a guide which people working in this field might actually find useful' (vii). As a 'nuts and bolts' manual to research the book is a valuable tool. Trachtenberg's detailed advice concerning the mastery of secondary literature is exemplary. Readers learn to identify the component parts of a good history book, ranging from major thesis to sub-theses to the structure of the argument. They learn ways to examine the soundness of documentary evidence. Most importantly they learn that reading is not a passive exercise of turning page after page, but an active engagement with an argument. This undoubtedly is the first step toward developing meaningful historical questions and an independent research strategy.

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Perhaps the most practical part of the practical guide is the appendix, which lists an impressive array of print and web sources, a veritable treasure chest for historians of international relations as well as political scientists. Most professors of international history will certainly be well advised to direct their graduate students to these pages—in fact most scholars in the field will probably return to this section frequently themselves as a starting point for their own research, though Trachtenberg's updated website might be ultimately more valuable than the appendix to the book.

Yet as a blueprint for research projects in international history, the book does not reflect the current state of the field. Rather it serves two primary constituents: students of politics who are interested in pursuing historical questions, and historians of foreign relations who are interested in high politics. International history, however, has expanded dramatically in the last decade and a half beyond the area of political and diplomatic history. The field now includes area specialists as well as cultural, social, economic, and borderlands historians.¹

¹ For a good introduction to the state of the field, see Patrick Finney (ed.) *Palgrave Advances in International History* (London: Palgrave, 2005).

Trachtenberg makes a gesture of inclusion toward such new approaches to international history. He argues—and nearly all historians would agree—that theory and methodology are vital components of historical work, that any historical work ‘has to have a strong conceptual core’ and that ‘evidence needs to be approached with specific questions in mind’ (vii). Trachtenberg might have made a stronger case for the importance of conceptualization. Stories of the past develop meaning through historians’ work of conceptualization. Historians are constantly involved in the process of assessing and re-assessing primary evidence based on shifting political, social, cultural, and economic contexts. That does not mean that every work of history is merely a reflection of a particular historian’s political or cultural preferences or of the political climate of the times. Instead historians constantly build on previous work to construct an ever more intricate and complex picture of the past. This is true for international history as for any other field within the historical profession.

The book only briefly discusses historical theories, beginning with Carl Hempel and R.G. Collingwood, even though Trachtenberg himself acknowledges that neither scholar’s ‘school’ was taken particularly seriously (6). Yet with the help of these two theoreticians Trachtenberg guides the debate toward the question in which he is most interested: can historians reconstruct an objective, knowable, and truthful past? Can scholars write history, as Leopold von Ranke famously put it, ‘wie es eigentlich gewesen’ (as it really was)? It is quite clear where Trachtenberg’s sympathies lie. He dismisses the likes of Hayden White and the postmodernists who followed him, who argued that the construction of a coherent historical narrative rests at least in part on imagination. These scholars lent, he charged, ‘a veneer of philosophical respectability to the new antiobjectivist view of history’ (12). Trachtenberg instead advocates philosophy of science as a better guide to historical methodology. While he acknowledges that ‘the idea that the aim is to learn the truth about the object of study can safely be abandoned,’ he nonetheless wants historians to make ‘the past intelligible’ through exploring the historical data in an objective, scientific way (23).

Trachtenberg’s selective and at times dismissive treatment of historical theories is the book’s greatest weakness. He often writes about ‘theory’ in the singular, as if the only theory scholars of international history have to concern themselves with is International Relations (IR) theory (37). This might do for some political scientists—although they, too, might take issue with this approach—but it won’t for historians. International history is a burgeoning field on the cutting edge of historical scholarship, yet after reading Trachtenberg you would not get that sense. His narrow conceptualization of international history no longer reflects the current state of scholarship. The field’s practitioners have offered creative ways of engaging with historical materialism, postmodernism, world systems theory, culture, race, and gender.² By engaging with those bodies of literature

² See, for instance, Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); William H. McNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*

students of international history in recent years have managed to reconnect to other historical fields and begun a lively and stimulating exchange that has given the field a significant boost.³

In place of interpretive theory Trachtenberg offers a fact-and-documents-based positivism. The book could be read as a spirited defense of what Mary Fulbrook has labeled 'source fetishism' and 'archive positivism'.⁴ Historical evidence, according to the appendix, is to be found either in published versions of archived material, policy papers of leading statesmen, or in the archives themselves. Only when dealing with recent events does Trachtenberg recommend relying on what he calls 'open sources: on newspaper and magazine accounts, on statements made by government officials, on testimony in congressional hearings, and the like' (249). Yet some of the most interesting recent work in international history has relied on non-archival sources: popular magazines, newspapers, film, novels, and non-fictional monographs. Such work presents a conceptualization of international history beyond the realm of high politics. For Trachtenberg, however, international history primarily consists of striking a balance between only two concepts, power and statecraft, the stuff of elite politics: 'Power realities are of fundamental importance,' he states, 'but statecraft also has a major impact on the course of events, and in doing history both invariably have to be taken into account' (67). This approach to doing history is more reminiscent of Ranke's *Primat der Aussenpolitik* than anything produced since then.

Two words surface repeatedly throughout Trachtenberg's text: 'basic' and 'real.' They are indicative of the author's faith in an objective and knowable past. Not only does Trachtenberg admonish students to search for the 'real' and focus on the 'basic' (for example, Hitler's 'basic goals' (65) or 'the real historical problem' (92)), he also writes with great assertiveness (and less evidence) about those 'real' and 'basic' historical elements. Yet can historians actually know what Hitler's 'basic goals' were? An historian's notion of these basic goals is at least in part the result of precisely the conceptualization

(New York: Columbia University Press, 1999 edn); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, 3 vols (New York: Academic Press, 1974-1988); Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

³ Tim Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Christopher Endy, *Cold War Holidays: American Tourism in France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Penny von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Petra Goedde *GIs and Germans: Culture, Gender and Foreign Relations, 1945-1949* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan, 2006); Barbara Keys, *Globalizing Sport: National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Naoko Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁴ Mary Fulbrook, *Historical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2002) 3.

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Trachtenberg advocates at the outset. Because there are different ways of conceptualizing the historical past, and because conceptualization depends on the theoretical approach each historian takes, historians produce multiple and at times contradictory interpretations of the past.

While few historians would want to side with those who claim all history is a mere construct, most would also argue that there is no single way to write the history of the Second World War, Trachtenberg's main case study. It all depends, as Trachtenberg rightly points out, on the kinds of questions one asks. For all of Trachtenberg's emphasis on documents and archives, the historian's work does not end with identifying documents, events, and dates. It begins with it. It is through a particular conceptualization, through analysis and interpretation that researchers make sense of the historical past. And this work creates not one but several, at times competing, historical 'truths.' Trachtenberg's frequent use of the terms 'real' and 'basic' imparts the impression that there are real and basic historical questions as opposed to false and superfluous ones (including presumably, questions about race, gender, popular culture, and the like); that there is one right way of doing history.

This returns us to the issue of power and statecraft and the relevance of culture and historical theory. Not all answers to questions of war, peace, power, and politics lie in the state archives of the great nations. The theoretical perspectives that Trachtenberg ignores have in many cases contributed to a better understanding of how states and cultures interact. Because of these new approaches scholars rarely speak of nations in monolithic terms (although Trachtenberg does on occasion). Most also try to avoid formulations like 'states just don't behave that way' (103), because states don't behave, people do. International historians recognize that within each state competing factions are often driving for one political objective or another, each with its very own agenda. That agenda might be driven by politics but also by economic considerations, cultural assumptions, prejudices, and misperceptions. Cultural historians of foreign relations are interested in exploring those assumptions that underlie a particular political position, and in doing so they do not ignore questions of power. On the contrary, they are acutely aware of how power differences both among nations and within a given state are expressed and legitimized through cultural references. Economic historians and world systems theorists focus on the larger economic structures underlying the unequal distribution of power in the world.

Trachtenberg's research guide provides no suggestions for the exploration of these cultural and economic questions, and thus he will take students only in one direction—the direction of high politics. Yet international history encompasses a far broader spectrum of scholarship, much of it now done in fields outside of diplomatic history. If diplomatic historians want to remain engaged in these debates in international history, they would do well to extend their agenda beyond what Trachtenberg offers here.

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This is not to say that the advice he offers is of little value—there is just a lot more out there that students should know. As the field of international history continues to expand and redefine itself, trying to define the nature of research in it might be akin to aiming at a moving target. The best advice to students might be contained in Trachtenberg's chapter on the critical analysis of historical texts. Students as well as senior scholars should read the latest literature in international history with the same kind of meticulous care Trachtenberg recommends for the classic works of A.J.P. Taylor or Fritz Fischer. Some of them will open up new avenues for future research, others will not hold up to expert scrutiny. Yet they will certainly help expand students' (and senior scholars') understanding of the nature and practice of international history.