

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



Reviewed Works:

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Introduction by Patrick Finney, Aberystwyth University

Marc Trachtenberg's *The Craft of International History* makes a distinctive contribution to the literature on international history, and it has justifiably attracted considerable comment since its publication.¹ Various other texts provide overviews of competing interpretive approaches or recent historiographical developments within the field, but there is nothing which offers such detailed practical advice on methodology as this 'guide to how historical work in this area can actually be done' (vii).² As one of the most eminent and accomplished international historians in the United States, with extensive publications on American and European international relations across the twentieth century and on history and strategy, Trachtenberg is well placed to offer such guidance. He attests in his preface that this long-gestated book is also a product of his experiences over many years delivering methodological instruction to undergraduate and graduate students. Recently he has generously made some of the course literature he developed for that purpose available online as part of the Internet supplement for his 1999 book *A Constructed Peace*, and this new text both codifies and considerably expands on that material.³ That Trachtenberg is also well-known for his trenchant views on the health, status, and orientation of our discipline – he played a leading role in the foundation of The Historical Society in 1998—lends this book additional significance as an intervention in debates about the practice of international history.

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The Craft of International History is explicitly intended to instruct both international historians and political scientists, since Trachtenberg believes that the two have much to learn from mutual dialogue. On the one hand, he argues that international historians can benefit from thinking rigorously about methodological and theoretical issues, and in

¹ See, for example, the earlier roundtable review entitled 'International Relations Theory and Diplomatic History', *Historically Speaking*, vol. 8, no.2, 2006, 11-21.

² See, for example, Patrick Finney (ed.), *Palgrave Advances in International History* (London: Palgrave, 2005); Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson (eds), *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 2nd edn); Robert D. Schulzinger (ed.), *A Companion to American Foreign Relations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

³ Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace. The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). These materials can still be accessed via Trachtenberg's website at <http://www.polisci.ucla.edu/faculty/trachtenberg>.

particular that their historical work will be improved by engagement with the conceptual and theoretical apparatus of International Relations (IR). On the other hand, he avers that political scientists can enrich their own work by cultivating a more sophisticated historical sensibility, since only thus is it possible to connect theory up with reality, and to get 'a real sense for how things actually work' in international politics (45). These claims are not uncontentious in either camp, of course, and while Trachtenberg's chief target audience is younger scholars just beginning their training, there is much in his book that will provide food for thought even for much more experienced practitioners.

Trachtenberg begins by discussing the theoretical foundations of historical inquiry, canvassing recent developments in both the philosophy of history and the philosophy of science; his view is that it is the latter body of writing rather than the former that is 'of real value to the practicing historian' (1). In chapter two, he expounds his views on the relationship between international history and IR. Insisting that 'a historical interpretation has to have a conceptual core' and that historians have to draw on 'a kind of theory ..., a certain sense for how things work' (30), he demonstrates how IR theory can assist historians in framing questions, developing research strategies and generating interpretations. Simultaneously, he asserts that political scientists should not—as they too commonly do—simply treat history as a store house of facts to be deployed in theory testing, but should rather be prepared to study historical episodes in more depth, so as to 'develop the kind of sensibility that makes intelligent judgement possible ... about how things work in the real world' (44-45). Lest he be thought to be demanding that theorists actually become historians, Trachtenberg then goes on in chapter three to illustrate how political scientists or historians wishing to orientate themselves in a new area of historical scholarship can reach fairly solid conclusions reasonably quickly through the critical analysis of secondary sources. After preliminary practical guidance on conducting literature searches, he stresses the need to identify the essence of a text's argument, its architecture or key claims, its internal logic, and the adequacy of the evidential base on which it rests. He then demonstrates how this method can work in practice by case study critiques of canonical works by A. J. P. Taylor, Fritz Fischer, and Richard Neustadt.

Trachtenberg's fourth chapter moves beyond the analysis of individual texts to show how similar methods can be used to get to grips with whole bodies of historiography, thereby to develop one's own interpretation of some complex historical problem. He does this through a very extensive case study discussion of the origins of the Pacific War in 1941. Trachtenberg identifies the key explanatory problems within this larger historical issue, specifically the nature of American attitudes towards the developing global crisis of late 1941; the intentions of Roosevelt's policy towards Japan; the nature of Japanese policy towards the United States; the linkages between American policy in the Pacific and towards Europe; and how these elements fit into the larger story of the course of international politics from 1939 to 1941. Through identifying the core claims, internal logic and evidential base of important texts, weighing competing interpretations against each other and bringing to bear some evidence from primary sources, Trachtenberg elaborates his own interpretation, a variant of the 'back door to war' thesis in which 'Roosevelt used the

situation with Japan as a way of bringing the United States into the European war' (131). This chapter is by far the longest in the book, comprising almost a third of the two hundred pages of substantive text, but this is in line with Trachtenberg's strategic purpose: in seeking to illustrate the thought processes behind the evolution of an interpretation, he has deliberately left 'a lot of the scaffolding up' (viii).

If these parts of the book devote considerable attention to larger theoretical, methodological, and interpretive issues, the remainder of it is relatively more concerned with the 'nuts and bolts' business of conducting archive-based international history. Chapter five discusses how to go about working with documents, exploring—again, with copious practical examples—the kinds of materials likely to prove helpful, the need to approach them with meaningful questions in mind, and problems of reliability, positioning, selectivity, and gaps in the record. Chapter six offers detailed guidance on how to go about starting a project, and particularly on how to use a variety of electronic and printed databases to identify the key secondary works and useful primary sources relative to any given topic. Chapter seven moves on to the writing up phase, with advice on formulating an argument, imparting structure to exposition, the integration of evidence and analysis, and the process of refining texts through multiple drafts. Finally, the book concludes with two very extensive appendices, the first essentially bibliographical and concerned with the identification of relevant scholarly literature, the second dealing with access to published and archival primary sources.

The reviewers gathered together here concur that Trachtenberg's book is a very valuable and innovative contribution to the international history literature, and that graduate students—and, indeed, faculty—will profit greatly from his practical methodological advice. However, they also express a series of reservations about his over-arching vision of the discipline and the validity or robustness of some of his more specific claims.

1. Trachtenberg never explicitly discusses how he construes the terrain of international history, but his treatment implies that he regards it as essentially equivalent to the history of high politics and diplomacy. Several reviewers lament that this 'traditional' vision conveys a misleading and outdated impression of the breadth and diversity of practice within the contemporary discipline, since it not only marginalises recent developments in strategic, intelligence, and economic sub-fields but also the whole gamut of work flourishing under the rubric of 'culturalism'. Each of us is entitled to form our own judgement as to what constitutes the most significant work in the discipline, of course, but several reviewers suggest that Trachtenberg's chosen stance limits the applicability of his insights and the utility of his book as a classroom introduction for tyro scholars. Does Trachtenberg then—despite the confident definite article which heads his book's title—in fact only offer guidance on how *some* historical work in this area is actually done?
2. Trachtenberg insists that international historians need to bring to bear conceptual and theoretical thinking in their work, and that IR theory can provide profitable

stimuli here, but he consistently privileges one particular theoretical approach, namely that of realism. Indeed, his whole text is suffused with a sense that realism provides the crucial commonsense insight into 'how things work' in international politics (30). It may well be, as Geoff Roberts argues, that in partaking of a form of 'soft realism' Trachtenberg simply reflects the dominant mode of thinking within the discipline. But Antony Best and John Ferris both claim that this commitment leads Trachtenberg into making some dubious claims about causation in his case studies, while Petra Goedde asserts that it blinds him to more complex understandings of 'how states and cultures interact'. More problematically, Trachtenberg consistently talks of the need to deploy theory sceptically and selectively, and of the necessity to avoid imposing theory on the evidence, and yet he seems to have made a fairly whole-hearted investment in realism (puckishly, one might say he has indeed 'fall[en] in love with a certain way of looking at things' (33)). Such a commitment can certainly be defended, but this is not done explicitly within the text, where readers are persistently led to believe that 'things more or less *have* to work' in the way realism dictates (35).⁴

3. A related criticism is that Trachtenberg defines 'theory' in too restricted a fashion. When discussing IR theory, he draws his examples exclusively from mainstream, 'hard' American political science—referring, for example, to 'offense-defense' theory or the 'relative gains' literature—to the neglect of other approaches—such as constructivism—which also have much to offer international historians. Moreover, as Petra Goedde argues, he does not consider the wider range of social and cultural theories which have recently been deployed to fruitful effect by historians in many different fields. Of course, no author can tackle the totality of any subject within the spatial constraints of a single text and so all will prioritise some approaches over others, but these choices do have normative implications which the student target audience might not readily discern. Moreover, if international historians are to remain engaged with wider intellectual debates in the academy and society, do they not need to be equipped to respond when they encounter these alternative approaches in their reading?
4. Trachtenberg's concentration on high politics and his realism both conduce to an attitude towards sources that troubles some of the reviewers. His conception of elite policy makers as super-rational actors, enjoying privileged access to 'the realities of international politics' (153), leads him to prioritise traditional political and diplomatic archival materials ('you should start at the top and proceed from there' (142)) and to downplay the potential contribution of open sources. While the former obviously remain crucial for many topics in international history, Antony Best observes that exploration of the latter is essential to illuminate the context and constraints within which policy makers operated. Pushing this point further, Petra Goedde argues that culturalist international historians have made fruitful use of a

⁴ Trachtenberg talks more explicitly of his engagement with realist theory in his 'Rejoinder' in the roundtable 'International Relations Theory and Diplomatic History', 20-21.

whole range of non-archival sources to illuminate the wider systems of cultural values and assumptions that condition the exercise of political power, in tune with their more expansive conceptualisation of international relations. Is it not the case that what constitutes the 'key bodies of evidence' (87) is never self-evident, but rather depends on the theoretical and interpretive assumptions that historians are bringing to bear?

5. The reviewers devote considerable attention to Trachtenberg's extended case study of the road to Pearl Harbor. Antony Best and John Ferris both argue that his treatment is flawed in its specifics because he has failed to follow his own excellent bibliographical advice on the location and identification of the key works on a given topic. Best argues that Trachtenberg has overlooked some of the most important contributions to the literature, and Ferris concurs, lamenting particularly Trachtenberg's apparent unfamiliarity with the recent—and highly germane—literature on the intelligence dimension. The two reviewers are also critical of the reliability of Trachtenberg's preferred authorities for explaining the nature of Japanese policy. That Trachtenberg has based his analysis on an idiosyncratic selection of the literature and skewed reading of the evidence arguably undercuts the plausibility of his 'back door to war' interpretation. Moreover, Best and Ferris also imply that Trachtenberg's interpretive preferences here are not unconnected to his commitment to realism. For Ferris, Trachtenberg errs in his interpretation of Japanese policy because of his explicit belief that no 'rational' state in its position would have contemplated war with the United States. From this, given Trachtenberg's over-arching assumption about the rational and calculating nature of statecraft, a particular characterisation of American policy has to follow to account for the outbreak of war. Best similarly argues that the 'back door to war' thesis over-simplifies a complex historical reality, downplays the significance of ideology, misperception, and unexpected contingencies, and is withal far too determinist and neat and tidy.
6. Moving beyond the specifics of Trachtenberg's interpretation, this case study also raises some general questions about his prescriptions for the practice of international history. First, do the alleged deficiencies of Trachtenberg's source base here throw some doubt on the general applicability or adequacy of his advice on how to conduct preliminary bibliographical searches? Second, is tension not generated as Trachtenberg sets out to demonstrate how to develop an interpretation—how, in other words, to do international history—but concludes with the adoption of a position at odds with the dominant scholarly consensus? Trachtenberg's rhetoric suggests an impatience with interpretive pluralism: he raises the stakes when he suggests that when authors disagree, the key question we need to ask is 'who's right?' (79). By his own lights, then, we are led to conclude in this case that either he has erred or the 'serious writers' (107) with whom he disagrees have done so. Student readers are likely to be left slightly confused here, as by his assertion that in case of disagreements it is possible to 'get to the bottom'

of the issue simply by looking 'in a very targeted way at the empirical evidence' (107), as if the eminent authorities on the other side of the debate had not already done this. Were Trachtenberg simply presenting his interpretation as but one amongst many—as the kind of reading that an historian inclined towards realism might favour—then this would be less problematic, but his treatment rather implies that he has found a privileged method for penetrating through to the actual logic underlying these events.

7. Although it was clearly not Trachtenberg's intention to write a treatise on historical theory, some of the reviewers regret that he did not develop his thinking here further. Petra Goedde criticises his attachment to 'fact-and-documents based positivism', charging that he simply brackets the epistemological challenges entailed in historical work. Does Trachtenberg then fail to deal adequately with the fact that historians, even when adhering scrupulously to disciplinary conventions about the handling of empirical evidence, inevitably generate 'multiple and at times contradictory interpretations of the past' because of the divergent conceptualisations and theoretical approaches they bring to bear? In this respect, it is perhaps noteworthy that in his critical analysis of secondary texts he directs our attention to their explicit argument, architectural structure, internal logic, and supporting evidence, but relatively neglects the issue of their more profound underpinning assumptions. Equally, it might have been helpful if in his chapter on working with documents he had considered some historiographical case studies where historians have reached conflicting conclusions on the basis of the same empirical evidence.
8. Geoff Roberts is much more sympathetic to Trachtenberg's theoretical position, though he feels that Trachtenberg is too dismissive of R. G. Collingwood and that his historiographical practice is actually more in tune with Collingwoodian insights than he is prepared to admit. Roberts also regrets that Trachtenberg does not devote more attention to the issue of narrative. Roberts is no partisan of Hayden White, but he observes that other understandings of the nature and function of narrative are available and that Trachtenberg neglects these with his turn to the philosophy of science literature, predominantly concerned as it is with the framing of potentially answerable questions and the rational development of 'a powerful deductive system' (27). Trachtenberg's insistence on imparting 'a sense for a certain element of *necessity*' (185) in composing a work of history is slightly misplaced for Roberts, who would emphasise instead contingency and 'the *possibility* of human choice'. This suggests that it is not necessary to subscribe to White's notion of narration as a 'poetic act' to think that there is more to say about the transformation of data into narrative than Trachtenberg offers in his final chapter.