The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method

Roundtable Review

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Marc Trachtenberg’s modest aim is ‘to provide 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). In my opinion he has succeeded brilliantly. Reading his book I was transported back four decades to the excitement I felt when reading C. Wright Mills’ appendix ‘On Intellectual Craftsmanship’ in The Sociological Imagination.¹

While Trachtenberg’s use of Pearl Harbor as the central case study of his exploration of The Craft of International History is excellent, I do not find some of his other examples so convincing. In particular, I do not agree that the absence of evidence in western archives that the Soviets wanted the re-establishment of a united Germany demonstrates that this was not Stalin’s goal in the immediate postwar period (158-159). In fact, the creation of a united Germany—provided the terms were right—was the consistent aim of Soviet policy from the Potsdam conference onwards (prior to that Stalin had indeed favoured dismemberment). There is plenty of evidence in western sources of Soviet proposals and overtures regarding German unity; and the new materials from Russian archives simply confirm that this was a real policy and not just propaganda. Indeed, my own detailed research on both sets of sources has convinced me that the Soviets did not finally abandon the goal of a united Germany until the end of 1955.

But this particular argument about evidence and its interpretation can wait for another day because Trachtenberg’s book is much more than a masterly exposition of the historian’s craft. It is also an important contribution to the developing dialogue between historians and political scientists working in the field of International Relations (IR). One of the features of this discussion has been the effort by practising historians to define the theoretical basis of their research and how it compares with the disciplinary traditions of political scientists.² Trachtenberg—a diplomatic historian who is Professor of Political

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Science at UCLA—devotes his first two chapters to this topic and it is this section of the book that I want to focus on in my contribution to this roundtable.

Chapter one on ‘The Theory of Historical Inquiry’ is devoted to the nature of historical understanding and explanation, and Trachtenberg begins by contrasting the views of Carl Hempel and R. G. Collingwood. The philosopher Hempel published a famous article in 1942 on ‘The Function of General Laws in History’ in which he argued that for an historical explanation to be anything more than a mere ‘explanation sketch’ it had to demonstrate that what happened was inevitable given an initial set of conditions and the operation of a ‘covering law’. In other words, in history as in science, explanation should take the form of a deductive theory (1-4). As Trachtenberg notes, Hempel’s views were not very attractive to most historians, who thought that covering laws were notable by their absence in human history and considered historical events more a function of human choice and agency than of deterministic processes. However, as he also says, the Hempelian approach does have the virtue of underlining that ‘a strong interpretation should have a certain predictive force’; that is, if further evidence confirms the expectations generated by an historical argument then that is a good test of its explanatory power (4).

The main philosophical alternative to Hempel when the ‘covering law’ debate was at its height in the 1950s and 1960s was offered in Collingwood’s work on human action and the re-enactment of past thought. According to Trachtenberg, ‘the Collingwood theory was quite extraordinary. … [T]he historian was concerned not with events as such but with actions’ (4). Later he asserts that Collingwood’s ‘whole approach would today … strike even the most conservative historians as narrow and dogmatic and in fact as a bit bizarre’ (5). Consequently ‘for most historians the Collingwood theory was not taken too seriously’ (6). Hempel and Collingwood, states Trachtenberg, ‘represented opposite ends of a spectrum: one emphasized structure and law-like regularity, and the other free will and human agency. But every practicing historian knows that both factors come into play. Part of the art of doing history is being able to figure out how exactly in any particular case the balance between them is to be struck, and this of course is an empirical and not a philosophical problem’ (6-7).

Collingwood, who died in 1943, was an historian (of Roman Britain) as well as a philosopher. On this side of the Atlantic, at least, he is known as the historians’ philosopher. I would see myself as a neo-Collingwoodian historian and I do not think of myself as particularly reactionary or bizarre. More pertinently, despite his dismissal of his utility, I would classify Trachtenberg as a Collingwoodian too! True, Collingwood thought the primary object of historical knowledge was past human actions, but that did not mean he discounted either the importance of the events created by those actions or the impact of past actions on the shape of subsequent events. Although Collingwood was mainly concerned with the impact of intentional, rational action and described the historian’s reconstruction of that action in terms of a psychological process of ‘re-enactment’, that did
not preclude a role for the irrational, the unforeseen and the accidental, or, indeed, the force of material circumstance.³

As far as I can see, each and every case study in Trachtenberg’s book is classically Collingwoodian in its focus on the reasons for the human actions that led to major historical events, whether Pearl Harbor, the outbreak of the First World War or lesser occurrences such as the Skybolt affair. The same applies to most historical research, not least in the sphere of international history, including Trachtenberg’s own writings. I detect little determinism, except in the loosest sense, in any of Trachtenberg’s books, but see plenty of evidence of how human free will, choice, decision, and action determined what happened.

One point on which Trachtenberg does agree with Collingwood is the method of posing questions about the past that are then put to the empirical test of evidence (15-16). In this respect the methods of historians are analogous to those of scientists. In both cases the object of the exercise is to detect a meaningful pattern of events that enhances our understanding of either nature or human affairs. From a Collingwoodian perspective, the events that constitute human affairs are primarily a consequence of human action—a point of view that Trachtenberg implicitly endorses in his practice as an historian, if not in his explicit theorising.

A third theorist tackled by Trachtenberg is Hayden White (7-11). It is in this section of the book that he comes closest to dealing with what for me is the missing dimension of The Craft of International History: an explicit treatment of the question of narrative. Narrative is the typical mode in which historians, especially diplomatic historians, choose to conduct their research and write up their results. Their explanations and understandings are embedded in the stories they tell about past actions and events. Historians’ narratives are often replete with analyses, generalizations and interpretations, but it is the storytelling core that constitutes both the form and the content of historical knowledge. Hayden White’s well-known take on historical narration is that these stories are artificial forms imposed on the past by historians. To that extent the ‘poetic acts’ of historians that create narratives result in ‘verbal fictions’ that are as much invented as found in the evidence. Trachtenberg responds to this challenge by defending the idea that historical research does connect up with the real world and does produce meaningful knowledge that is in some sense true (if not The Truth).

This defence is fine as far as it goes, but an alternative account of historical narrative to that proposed by White would have been welcome, and many such accounts do exist.⁴

³ In his commentary on Collingwood Trachtenberg refers to The Idea of History, a posthumously published composite text of his writings, lectures and manuscripts. A clearer and perhaps more authentic guide to Collingwood’s views can be found in the later edition of his work, The Principles of History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
Trachtenberg prefers instead to utilise the writings of the philosopher of science N. R. Hanson to argue that the essence of historical understanding is to identify patterns and see how things (events) fit together (14-29). But what creates the pattern and the 'fit' in the first place? Surely it is human action. Narrative is generally preferred by historians because it best captures the patterning and interconnections created by human action. This applies to Trachtenberg’s work as much as it does to my own and *The Craft of International History* is an edifying exploration of the many techniques that historians use to construct their narratives. Missing for me, however, is a recognition that form flows from content and that historians narrate action not just because that is what they find in the evidence: it is their fundamental way of looking at the world, their ontology as the philosophers would say.

In chapter two Trachtenberg considers ‘Diplomatic History and International Relations Theory’ and asks what historians and political scientists can learn from each other. His answer is that political scientists can generate interesting questions for historians to test empirically, while political scientists can learn from historians a good sense of the way the world actually works. In common with most international historians (myself included) Trachtenberg is what the IR people call a ‘soft realist’: broadly speaking, this entails the view that states and their governments pursue perceived national interests as and when they can, depending on power calculations and domestic politics. Within this framework of thinking about international politics there is also ample room for the role of ideas, personalities and the particular choices of politicians in specific circumstances. You could call this broad sense of how international politics works a theory, as Trachtenberg seems to want to, but to me it is just commonsense, informed by experience and rationality. How else would you expect states to behave in the given historical circumstances of international politics? On the other hand, Trachtenberg has a point when he quotes Robert Jervis to the effect that it is only having an explicitly formulated theory in the form of generalizations about expected patterns of state behaviour that makes it possible to be surprised by the course of events, opening up the possibility of challenging cherished assumptions about the way the world supposedly works (38). In the end it is this element of surprise that makes the detail of history so interesting.

The rest of the book is devoted to instructing historians and political scientists alike in methods of documentary analysis and the thinking through of interpretative problems. Trachtenberg’s reflections on these aspects of his craft are as practical as they are insightful and illuminating. We all have much to learn from him, not least from his final chapter on ‘Writing it Up’ where he tellingly glosses Peter Gay’s injunction that style ‘is not the dress of thought but part of its essence’ (183). Trachtenberg here returns also to Hanson and to the notion that the aim of historical texts is to interpret and structure events in order to reveal the logic and meaning of past patterns of human affairs. Trachtenberg links this to the idea that one of the keys to historical reconstruction and understanding is appreciating ‘a

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certain element of *necessity*’ in an unfolding story, which he also calls ‘the basic *logic* underlying the course of events’ (185). This is the point at which I part company from him. From my narrativist and actionist perspective, a quite different emphasis emerges: it is the element of the *possibility* of human choice that prevails, not the logic of events.