

# **Questions, Questions: Improving Dialogue in the Theory/History Nexus**

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## Questions, Questions: Improving Dialogue in the Theory/History Nexus

The last fifteen years have seen significant renewed interest in the relationship between social scientific and historical approaches to the study of international relations.<sup>1</sup> One of the aims of this work has been to improve dialogue between IR theorists and international historians: the 1997 *International Security* symposium on the relationship between history and political science sought, inter alia, to 'demonstrate how a conversation between the disciplines can give added value to both'.<sup>2</sup> However, the ensuing discussion has tended to reinforce a separation between the enterprises of Theory and History.<sup>3</sup> Even attempts to reconcile IR and History have, by criticizing the alleged failures of one side or the other, often served to emphasize their distinctness. For example, although Wohlforth rightly criticizes the apparent reluctance of IR theorists to change their views in response to fresh historical evidence, he describes such evidence as providing 'a unique opportunity to clarify and advance key theoretical debates', thereby reinforcing an impression that Theory and History are distinct enterprises.<sup>4</sup>

If our aim is to improve dialogue between IR theorists and international historians, then this separation must be recognized as part of the problem.<sup>5</sup> In IR, substantive inquiry is, necessarily, both theoretical and historical. History is not an 'autonomous body of evidence' from which theorists can select according to their analytical purposes: historical inquiry

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<sup>1</sup> See the symposium in *International Security* 22, no. 1 (1997); Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds.), *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001); and the forum in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 37, no. 2 (2008). The issues hark back to IR's 'second great debate'. See Hedley Bull, 'International Theory: The Case for a Classical Approach', *World Politics* 18, no. 3 (1966): 361-77.

<sup>2</sup> Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, 'Diplomatic History and International Relations Theory: Respecting Difference and Crossing Boundaries', *International Security* 22, no. 1 (1997): 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> See Ian Clark, 'International Relations: Divided by a Common Language?' *Government and Opposition* 37, no. 2 (2002): 274.

<sup>4</sup> William C. Wohlforth, 'A Certain Idea of Science: How International Relations Theory Avoids Reviewing the Cold War', in *Reviewing the Cold War: Approaches, Interpretations, Theory*, ed. Odd Arne Westad (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 127.

<sup>5</sup> See Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'International Relations and the "Problem of History"', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 34, no. 1 (2005): 134; Ian Hall, 'World Government and Empire: The International Historian as Theorist', *International Affairs* 82, no. 6 (2006): 1165; Andreas Osiander, *Before the State: Systemic Political Change in the West from the Greeks to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2-3.

requires a theory, or at least what Trachtenberg calls 'a sense for how things work'.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, insofar as they have empirical content, theoretical claims *are* historical claims: they not only help to construct the historical record, but also possess their own distinctive historical contexts.<sup>7</sup> As enterprises, therefore, Theory and History need each other.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, they are inherently connected. Our interest, strictly speaking, should not be in the relationship *between* Theory and History, but rather in the Theory/History Nexus. The academic disciplines of History and IR may differ in their internal incentives, structures, and aesthetics, but they are engaged in a common explanatory project.<sup>9</sup>

A common response will be that theoretical and historical approaches to international relations may, nevertheless, be distinguished in terms of the questions they ask. Thus, for example, the distinction between nomothetic and idiographic disciplines is typically interpreted as a claim about what scholars seek to explain, rather than as a claim about the essence of their subject matter: IR theorists seek to explain things in general, whereas historians seek to explain things in particular.<sup>10</sup> Yet such a distinction cannot satisfactorily distinguish Theory from History, for the questions we ask are not independent of the Theory/History relationship, but rather carry implications about it. Where questions are formulated in ways that imply either that what is required is an act of theorizing followed by testing against the historical record, or that what is required is pure historical inquiry, divorced from all theoretical considerations, then the underlying vision is of Theory and History as distinct and separate enterprises.<sup>11</sup> Individual scholars must therefore actively choose to formulate their questions in ways that respect the inter-relationship between Theory and History and the concomitant need for theoretically-informed historical inquiry.

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas W. Smith, *History and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 1999), 190, 180; Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), 30.

<sup>7</sup> See Charles Reynolds, *Theory and Explanation in International Politics* (London: Martin Robertson, 1973), 119; Smith, *History and IR*, 30.

<sup>8</sup> See Barry Buzan and Richard Little, 'The Idea of "International System": Theory Meets History', *International Political Science Review* 15, no. 3 (1994): 231-2; Edward Ingram, 'The Wonderland of the Political Scientist', *International Security* 22, no. 1 (1997): 53.

<sup>9</sup> See Jack Levy, 'Too Important to Leave to the Other: History and Political Science in the Study of International Relations', *International Security* 22, no. 1 (1997): 23; Adam R. C. Humphreys, 'Beyond the Nomothetic-Idiographic Distinction: What International Relations can Learn from History', paper presented at the *British International Studies Association* annual conference, Leicester, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> See Levy, 'Too Important to Leave to the Other', 25.

<sup>11</sup> See George Lawson, 'The Eternal Divide?: History and International Relations', paper presented at the *British International Studies Association* annual conference, Leicester, 2009.

The prospects for productive dialogue between IR theorists and international historians therefore depend greatly on the questions that are asked and on the conceptions of the Theory/History relationship implied thereby. An important feature of such dialogue is likely to be debate about how these questions should properly be interpreted and about how any which imply an implausible conception of the Theory/History relationship may be reformulated such that they can be investigated in ways that are more sympathetic to the interdependence of the two enterprises. Smith argues that 'the dichotomies employed to distinguish history from political science ... are belied by the diversity and overlap of the field' and that, 'across a vast middle, students of history and politics are doing much the same thing'.<sup>12</sup> If Theory and History are, in practice, intertwined, then this is unsurprising. It is more surprising that representatives of this 'vast middle' have largely failed to explore how characterizations of the Theory/History relationship are produced and reproduced in the questions we ask.<sup>13</sup>

This paper addresses this challenge by showing how historically-inclined realist theorists tend to formulate their questions in ways that embody an implausible conception of the Theory/History nexus, thereby radically reducing their chances of generating either useful theory or good history. Although critiques of realists' approaches to History have been commonplace in IR, there has been insufficient focus on the precise questions they ask and on how they go about answering them. Yet inquiry into actual explanatory practices is crucial, for without it methodological critique can easily slip into abstract prescriptions (for example, that realists should 'do better history') which do little to overturn misleading conceptions of the Theory/History nexus. In practice, many realists ask questions that are essentially historical in nature, but formulate them as theoretical questions, the implication being that they can be answered in the abstract, with the answer then being tested against the historical record. The inevitable consequence is bad history, as realists not only trawl history for episodes that support their claims, but also read history through the restrictive lens of their preferred theoretical stories.

However, the aim of this paper is not merely to add to the already lengthy indictment of realist history. Instead, the aim is to show how a focus on the questions that realists ask can lead to productive change. For one of the most striking aspects of realists' explanatory practices is that they cannot, in practice, develop the kinds of theories that would allow them

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas W. Smith, *History and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 1999), 9, 11.

<sup>13</sup> A partial exception is Hidemi Suganami, *On the Causes of War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

to develop answers in the abstract and then test them against the historical record (even if such a record could be identified). In practice, they draw on their theories much as historians draw on theoretical ideas to frame their inquiries: as heuristic resources which embody emphases and priorities, but which do not determine research outcomes.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, they fail to recognize this aspect of their own explanatory practices partly because of the ways in which they formulate their questions. Exploring how such questions are formulated and might be re-formulated can, therefore, underpin a re-evaluation both of the purpose of realist theory and of the nature of the Theory/History nexus.

## **Realism and History, Revisited**

Many critiques of the conceptions and uses of history in IR focus their fire on realism. Thus it has become part of the accepted wisdom that neorealism is ahistorical.<sup>15</sup> It is said by its critics to be unable to explain change, especially social transformation, and to fail to provide a sound basis for understanding international history.<sup>16</sup> Smith contends, indeed, that, for Waltz, 'theory *should* be ahistorical in the sense that it is liberated from details of history and is meant to apply with equal force to any historical period'.<sup>17</sup> The consequence, as Cox points out, is that neorealists tend to view history as 'a quarry providing materials with which to illustrate variations on always recurrent themes'.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Hobson argues that, in this respect, neorealism exemplifies mainstream IR theory: it cuts off the present from its

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<sup>14</sup> See Donald J. Puchala, 'Woe to the Orphans of the Scientific Revolution', in *The Evolution of Theory in International Relations*, ed. Robert L. Rothstein (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 59; Humphreys, 'Beyond the Nomothetic-Idiographic Distinction'.

<sup>15</sup> An implicit part of the recovery of the ethical dimension of classical realism is that it is more open to history. See Smith, *History and IR*; Seán Molloy, *The Hidden History of Realism: A Genealogy of Power Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> See John Gerard Ruggie, 'Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Toward a Neorealist Synthesis', *World Politics* 35, no. 2 (1983): 261-85; Justin Rosenberg, 'What's the Matter with Realism?' *Review of International Studies* 16, no. 4 (1990): 285-303; Rodney Bruce Hall and Friedrich V. Kratochwil, 'Medieval Tales: Neorealist "Science" and the Abuse of History', *International Organization* 47, no. 3 (1993): 479-91; Paul Schroeder, 'Historical Reality vs. Neorealist Theory', *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 108-48; Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Smith, *History and IR*, 93.

<sup>18</sup> Robert W. Cox, 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 10, no. 2 (1981): 131.

historical roots and then extrapolates it backwards through time, generating a picture of international relations as an unchanging landscape of recurrence and repetition.<sup>19</sup>

Although such critiques clearly expose neorealism's failings, they do not sufficiently challenge the conception of the Theory/History nexus which underlies those failings. To criticize neorealism for being ahistorical in treating international relations as a realm of recurrence and repetition is not, in itself, to challenge the neorealist belief that Theory is properly concerned with the realm of recurrence and repetition and History with the realm of contingency and chance. To criticize neorealism for failing to provide a sound basis for understanding international history is to risk reinforcing a perception that we can either approach international history as theorists, testing our theories against the historical record, or as historians, proceeding purely inductively. By failing to challenge these beliefs, critics play into neorealists' hands: Waltz seeks to defend neorealism by insisting on the importance of distinguishing, first, between regularity and repetition, which theory can explain, and accident, which it cannot, and, second, between the development of theories and the identification of facts.<sup>20</sup> He contends, in short, that History is not what neorealists (should) do.

This misunderstanding of the Theory/History nexus generates both bad history and bad theory. Waltz conceives of history as an independently identifiable array of facts and of theory as what explains them.<sup>21</sup> He thereby fails to recognize, first, that without a set of conceptual tools with which to label and organize empirical material, we cannot even say what the facts are, and, second, that insofar as they have empirical content, theoretical claims already are historical claims and, moreover, play a role in constituting the historical record. Neorealists are therefore necessarily bad historians, for they fail to recognize how neorealism frames their construction of the historical record, limiting the range of historical evidence that they can recognize, let alone consider. Moreover, Waltz's insistence that theories examine only the kinds of causal mechanisms which might underpin recurrent patterns reflects his

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<sup>19</sup> John M. Hobson, 'What's at Stake in "Bringing Historical Sociology *Back* into International Relations"? Transcending "Chronofetishism" and "Tempocentrism" in International Relations', in *Historical Sociology of International Relations*, eds. Stephen Hobden and John M. Hobson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 9.

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory', *International Affairs* 44, no. 1 (1990): 22-6; Richard Little, 'International Relations and the Methodological Turn', *Political Studies* 39, no. 3 (1991): 471-2.

<sup>21</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), ch. 1.

conception of Theory as something that stands in contrast to History.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, bad history and bad theory go together. For, contra Waltz, nothing prevents theorists from engaging with human agency and chance, just as nothing prevents historians from exploring recurring causal mechanisms. If neorealism can explain only 'a small number of big and important things', then this reflects Waltz's misunderstanding of the Theory/History nexus.<sup>23</sup>

Despite Waltz's protestations about the distinctiveness of Theory and History, there is, in fact, a lot of realist history. It exists in two main forms. The first is work by historians which draws on or presents realist ideas, for example Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, which explores changes in relative power between the great powers, Leffler's *A Preponderance of Power*, which shows how US national security policy after WW2 was framed by perceptions of relative power, and Trachtenberg's *A Constructed Peace*, which explores the origins of the Cold War through the lens of the need to manage German power.<sup>24</sup> The second is work by realist theorists in IR, including neorealists, whose main purpose may be to illustrate, test, or develop realist ideas, but who also engage in some detail with history. This class of work includes book-length historical studies, such as Friedberg's *The Weary Titan*, Wohlforth's *The Elusive Balance*, Christensen's *Useful Adversaries*, Zakaria's *From Wealth to Power*, and Layne's *The Peace of Illusions*.<sup>25</sup> It also includes work by, inter alia,

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<sup>22</sup> Suganami points out, furthermore, that Waltz's claims about what kinds of mechanisms might underpin recurrent patterns are overstated. See Suganami, *On the Causes of War*, 26-7.

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Reflections on *Theory of International Politics: A Response to my Critics*', in *Neorealism and its Critics*, ed. Robert O. Keohane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 329.

<sup>24</sup> Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988); Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992); Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999). Some historical sociologists also exhibit realist sympathies. See John M. Hobson, 'The Two Waves of Weberian Historical Sociology in International Relations', in *Historical Sociology of IR*, eds. Hobden and Hobson, 63-81.

<sup>25</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); William Curti Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions During the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958* (Princeton N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1998); Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

Posen, Walt, J. Snyder, Miller, G. Snyder, Schweller, Copeland, Taliaferro, and Resende-Santos which offers multiple more or less detailed historical case studies.<sup>26</sup>

These two groups of scholars may be differentiated by their disciplinary affiliations, that is, the departments in which they took PhDs and hold positions and the journals in which they publish. However, the fact that both historians and IR theorists can draw on realist ideas when engaging with history demonstrates that the bald contention that realists produce bad history is inadequate. If it is realist IR theorists in particular who produce bad history, then what, apart from institutional affiliation, is the difference between works of History and of Theory? My contention is that there is something distinctive about the historical work done by realist theorists in IR, which is that they ask ahistorical questions. In short, whereas historians tend to ask "what happened and why?", the kinds of questions that realist theorists ask tend either to be of the form or to be translatable into the form "does what happened support my theory?".

Conventional wisdom has it that our choice of what questions to ask is unproblematic: if we are interested in the origins of WW1, then we ask "what caused WW1?". In practice, however, most such questions require translation in order for a satisfactory answer to be developed. This is because all explanations are contextual: we cannot explain anything to someone who understands nothing.<sup>27</sup> In order to explain to someone what caused WW1, we need to establish what aspect(s) of its origins they find puzzling. In practice, therefore, the question "what caused WW1?" may be translated into a whole host of other questions, each embodying a claim about what we already know, including, for example, "what made the pre-war system war-prone?", "what made Bethmann think that Britain might stay neutral?", or

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<sup>26</sup> See Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Jack L. Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Benjamin Miller, *When Opponents Cooperate: Great Power Conflict and Collaboration in World Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks: Great Power Intervention in the Periphery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); João Resende-Santos, *Neorealism, States, and the Modern Mass Army* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> See Hidemi Suganami, 'Narrative Explanation and International Relations: Back to Basics', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 37, no. 2 (2008): 334.

"why did Russia order general mobilization on July 30?".<sup>28</sup> This clarification of the question to be answered, involving an account of what we think we already know, is a necessary part of the process of inquiry. However, the proper translation may be more or less explicit. In practice, realist theorists often turn what appear to be historical questions into theoretical and ahistorical questions.

For example, Zakaria is apparently interested in the origins of the US's world role. He notes that many historians 'have asked why America expanded in the 1890s' but argues that a 'more puzzling question is why America did not expand more and sooner'.<sup>29</sup> At first glance, this looks like the specification of a question which will, in light of what we already know, be important for anyone (theorist or historian) interested in the origins of the US's world role. His observation that there are 'many instances in which the country's central decision-makers noticed and considered clear opportunities to expand American influence abroad and rejected them' looks like an attempt to clarify what we think we already know in a manner that brings the key question to the fore.<sup>30</sup> However, Zakaria goes on to note that historians' accounts of US expansion and nonexpansion 'stress different factors in each case, ranging from the balance of power to the influence of various interest groups to ideology – racism or social Darwinism or manifest destiny – to the idiosyncrasies of America's leaders'.<sup>31</sup> He objects that such 'a list of facts and factors cannot explain the general dynamic motivating foreign policy that would result in nonexpansion in the 1870s and 1880s and yet expansion in the 1890s'.<sup>32</sup>

Zakaria therefore starts with a historical question that anyone interested in the origins of the US's world role might be interested in, that is, why the US expanded in the 1890s but not before. However, rather than accepting that such a question is appropriately answered through a form of historical inquiry that also draws on theoretical ideas (such ideas being required, for example, in order to define what is meant by "expansion"), he abruptly turns it into a theoretical question, asking what single foreign policy dynamic might, in principle, underpin two apparently inconsistent behaviours, that is, failure to expand before the 1890s and expansion from the 1890s onwards.<sup>33</sup> Three aspects of this question, as formulated,

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<sup>28</sup> For a review of recent historiography see Keir A. Lieber, 'The New History of World War I and What it Means for International Relations Theory', *International Security* 32, no. 2 (2007): 155-91.

<sup>29</sup> Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Guzzini describes realism as a failed attempt to translate the maxims of nineteenth century European diplomacy into a scientific theory. Stefano Guzzini, *Realism in International*

make it ahistorical. First, the historical pattern that needs to be explained is presumed as part of our background knowledge and is not subject to further investigation. Second, the question of what single dynamic might underpin two divergent behaviours is defined in such a way that it has to be answered through abstract speculation, rather than through an engagement with the history: Zakaria explicitly contrasts the kind of answer he seeks to develop with the kinds of answers that historians give. Third, Zakaria expresses an intention to test two competing answers against the historical record.<sup>34</sup>

In his Preface, Zakaria expresses frustration that '[i]nternational relations is studied nowadays with a serious involvement in either history or social science theory, but rarely both'.<sup>35</sup> Yet he goes on to describe himself as 'examining the historical record for insights and evidence that shed light on broad theoretical topics in world politics, such as the rise of new great powers'.<sup>36</sup> This aim implies a separation between the enterprises of Theory and History which is replicated in how he defines his question: not as something that can be resolved through the application of theoretical insights in historical inquiry, but as something that must be resolved in the abstract and then confirmed against something identified, implausibly, as *the* historical record. A further irony is that Zakaria acknowledges that the explanations offered by historians who examine each instance of expansion or nonexpansion on its individual merits are 'more accurate' than his own explanation.<sup>37</sup> In other words, he condemns himself for doing bad history. In fact, as with the neorealists, his translation of a historical question that might be plausibly answered through theoretically-informed historical inquiry into a purely theoretical question that must be answered in the abstract implies a conception of the Theory/History nexus that cannot fail to produce bad history.

The fact that realist theorists tend to treat history as a testing ground for answers that are derived in the abstract forms the basis of most critiques of realist history. However, one thing missing from such critiques is exploration of the process by which apparently historical questions are formulated as questions that demand abstract answers. In the next section, this paper therefore examines the struggles of two further realist theorists (Walt and Schweller) to reconcile Theory and History, showing how they end up asking questions that will inevitably produce bad history. It finds cause for optimism in the fact that, despite their attempts to

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*Relations and International Political Economy: The Continuing Story of a Death Foretold* (London: Routledge, 1998), 1.

<sup>34</sup> Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*, 10.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

reformulate historical questions as theoretical questions, they are unable to develop the kinds of theories that can answer questions in the abstract: in practice they, like historians, draw on their theories as heuristic resources.<sup>38</sup> The demand to formulate questions in theoretical terms is therefore a case of the emperor's new clothes: when we examine realists' actual explanatory practices, it is exposed as an empty demand. What is required for realists to do better history, therefore, is that they think more carefully about the questions they ask and about the relationship between theory and history which those questions imply. Opening their inquiries to a more plausible conception of the Theory/History nexus is the key to a more productive dialogue with international historians.

### **Walt and Schweller: Realist Historians?**

In *Revolution and War*, Walt develops the kinds of detailed historical case studies that are so noticeably absent from Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, he is committed to 'detailed narrative history': he recognizes that one cannot understand the events he examines 'without exploring them in some depth'.<sup>40</sup> The book has, nevertheless, been strongly criticized by leading international historians. Schroeder cites Walt as an example of a political scientist whose 'approach to history and ... historical research' is good, but who fails to 'understand or keep sufficiently in mind that the historical "facts" they abstract from historical accounts and organize and stylize for their own purposes' are themselves selected and constructed by historians for particular explanatory purposes.<sup>41</sup> Ingram argues that theories such as Walt's often seem 'closed and self-referential: an alternative to the evidence rather than a way of making more of it'. Walt's cases are, he suggests, not real tests of his theory, but 'illustrations of a proposition taken to be sound'.<sup>42</sup>

These critiques, which take issue with Walt's approach to history, rather than with his specific historical claims, indicate that, like many IR theorists, he mistakenly treats history as an unproblematic body of evidence which it is the job of theory to interpret. However, they neglect one of the most striking features of his work: although he attempts to demonstrate the utility of his balance-of-threat theory in explaining 'why revolutions increase the intensity of

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<sup>38</sup> See Humphreys, 'Beyond the Nomothetic-Idiographic Distinction'.

<sup>39</sup> See Smith, *History and IR*, 114.

<sup>40</sup> Walt, *Revolution and War*, viii.

<sup>41</sup> Paul W. Schroeder, 'History and International Relations Theory: Not Use or Abuse, but Fit or Misfit', *International Security* 22, no. 1 (1997): 71-2.

<sup>42</sup> Ingram, 'The Wonderland of the Political Scientist', 56.

security competition between states and thereby create a high probability of war', his historical narratives are not easily reconciled with his theoretical claims.<sup>43</sup> This is significant because it shows that, although Walt conceives of Theory and History as separate enterprises, he is not in fact able to develop a theory from which historical narratives can be read off. This, in turn, reveals the potential for reformulating the questions Walt asks in a manner that embodies a more realistic understanding of the Theory/History nexus, thereby facilitating better history and more useful theory.

Walt intends his balance-of-threat theory to 'provide a more complete and accurate account of the forces that influence state behaviour' than neorealism does.<sup>44</sup> He seeks to improve on neorealism by arguing that states respond not to changes in the distribution of capabilities, but to threats, which are a function of aggregate power, perceptions of intent, and the offense-defense balance.<sup>45</sup> Building on this model, he identifies three causal mechanisms linking revolution to intensified security competition and thence to war: first, changes in the balance of power create windows of opportunity; second, changes in intentions, exacerbated by a lack of information, lead to new conflicts of interest and to spirals of suspicion; and third, the mobilization of new forms of social power contributes to perceptions of offense-dominance.<sup>46</sup> His lament that current theoretical understanding of the relationship between revolution and war 'consists largely of untested "folk theories"', allied to his description of his historical narratives as 'empirical tests' of his theory, suggests that he, like Zakaria, views theory as something that is first developed in the abstract and only later applied to the historical record.<sup>47</sup> Yet his account of the causes of the War of the First Coalition deviates strikingly from what we might, therefore, expect.

Walt identifies 'three main causes of war in 1792 ... the dynastic ambitions of the other great powers (especially Prussia), the struggle for power within France, and a series of regrettable miscalculations on both sides'.<sup>48</sup> He describes initial international responses as

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<sup>43</sup> Walt, *Revolution and War*, 1. See Mlada Bukovansky, 'The Altered State and the State of Nature – the French Revolution and International Politics', *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 202. Barnett makes a similar point about Walt's earlier work. See Michael Barnett, 'Alliances, Balances of Threats, and Neorealism', in *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate*, eds. John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003), 228.

<sup>44</sup> Walt, *Revolution and War*, 19.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 32-43. See Kurt Dassel, 'Revolution and War: A Critique', *Security Studies* 6, no. 2 (1996): 173.

<sup>47</sup> Walt, *Revolution and War*, 7, viii.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 62.

'rather mild', suggesting that this was at least partly because the revolution 'reduced French power, thereby decreasing the danger that pre-revolutionary France had posed and creating opportunities to profit at French expense'.<sup>49</sup> Prussia and Austria, he records, were already 'interested in territorial revisions' and he argues that their alliance in 1791, far from marking the 'beginning of a counter-revolutionary crusade', was 'inspired by acquisitive motives'.<sup>50</sup> He also emphasizes the efforts by the Girondin faction in the Legislative Assembly to stir up war, a campaign which, he argues, was designed at least partly to 'strengthen their own influence in the Assembly'.<sup>51</sup> He notes that '[m]omentum for war increased after the Girondins' opponents also concluded that it would advance their own political fortunes': by January 1792 'a number of the contenders for power were in favour of war, each convinced that it would strengthen his own position and weaken his internal rivals'.<sup>52</sup>

Far from presenting a story in which the French revolution altered the balance-of-threats, therefore, Walt's narrative focuses chiefly on external ambition and internal conflict.<sup>53</sup> Despite his claim that the case 'provides strong support' for his theory, taking advantage of other states' weakness appears to be consistent with offensive realism, rather than with Walt's brand of defensive realism, whilst he explicitly contrasts his theoretical approach with those that emphasize internal revolutionary politics as causes of war.<sup>54</sup> Yet for all that Walt's narratives diverge from what we might expect given his theoretical proclamations, they also, nonetheless, reflect and express the limitations of his conceptual vocabulary. Thus, for example, Rengger argues that Walt shows little awareness of how states and societies 'are embedded in a complex web of socio-economic forces, competing norms and values, cultural assumptions and practices'.<sup>55</sup> Smith argues that *Revolution and War* highlights 'the problem of "theoretical filtering", or how a closed theoretical design may

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 57-9.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 49, 64; Stephen M. Walt, 'Rethinking Revolution and War: A Reply to Jack Goldstone and Kurt Dassel', *Security Studies* 6, no. 2 (1996): 191.

<sup>51</sup> Walt, *Revolution and War*, 65.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 68. See Dassel, 'Revolution and War', 163.

<sup>53</sup> This is apparent even in Walt's own summary of his arguments, where he states that the revolution 'altered French foreign policy objectives (both for ideological reasons and because competing factions within France used foreign policy to challenge their internal opponents)' and that 'France's apparent weakness invited other states to seek gains'. Walt, *Revolution and War*, 46.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 46, 9-10. Balance-of-threat theory is equally unable to explain how 'what had begun as a defensive struggle' became 'an offensive war of conquest'. Ibid., 77.

<sup>55</sup> Nick J. Rengger, Review of Walt, *Revolution and War*, *International Affairs* 74, no. 1 (1998): 204.

unduly narrow the researcher's range of historical interests and evidence'.<sup>56</sup> This is most obvious, he argues, in 'the idea that states seek security above all else', an assumption that is required to sustain Walt's comparison of cases which arise in different international normative contexts.<sup>57</sup>

Ultimately, Walt falls between two stools, neither able to sustain his theory empirically nor to generate plausible historical narratives. His difficulties arise because he conceives of Theory and History as separate enterprises, seeking first to develop a theory in the abstract and then to apply it to something independently identifiable as the historical record. He therefore turns a historical question, that is, "do revolutions intensify the security competition between states, resulting in war, and if so why?" into an ahistorical question, that is, "how can we improve on neorealism in seeking to understand the links between revolution and war?". Moreover, he proceeds not by 'undertaking a full empirical examination of ... the relevant universe of cases', but by seeking to generate, in the abstract, a single story that can underpin an interpretation of each and every case.<sup>58</sup> This entails deliberately subjugating the individuality of each case to the over-arching theoretical narrative.<sup>59</sup> Yet when Walt comes to test his theory, he does ask a historical question, that is, "why did the French revolution result in international conflict?". The problem he then faces is that his deliberately non-historical approach cannot deal satisfactorily with the historical particularity of the case. He ends up acknowledging some of that particularity in his narrative, but, nevertheless, seeking to defend his theory. The result is a narrative which is largely inconsistent with his theory, bookended by claims to the opposite effect.

Walt's difficulties reveal, inter alia, that his theory is not sufficiently closely specified to show that intensified security competition was the inevitable outcome of the international conditions that resulted from the French revolution. He is therefore unable to develop a theory commensurate with his conception of the Theory/History nexus. Rather than deriving his interpretations directly from his theory, he draws on its thematic material in a heuristic fashion: the theory shapes the questions he asks, the vocabulary he employs, and the factors

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<sup>56</sup> Smith, *History and IR*, 92.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 116. See also Bukovansky, 'The Altered State and the State of Nature', 201.

<sup>58</sup> Jack A. Goldstone, 'Revolution, War, and Security', *Security Studies* 6, no. 2 (1996): 134.

<sup>59</sup> Walt criticizes Halliday for developing an approach to revolutions which 'incorporates so many different factors that it is hard to imagine how anyone could combine all of them in a persuasive and testable explanatory theory'. Stephen M. Walt, 'Nothing Revolutionary', *Review of International Studies* 27, no. 4 (2001): 689.

he investigates, but it does not determine the precise content of his narratives.<sup>60</sup> It is this non-determinate relationship between theory and narrative which permits Walt to recognize some of that particularity in his cases which, in turn, prevents him from making a compelling case for the power of his theory. It also creates the possibility of reformulating the questions Walt asks in ways more conducive to productive dialogue with international historians. For they, too, draw on theories heuristically, the chief difference being that they draw on particular theories as required, rather than restricting themselves to a single set of insights.

Walt's inability to develop the kind of theory from which narratives may be directly read off undermines any case for insisting that theories should be brought to historical problems fully formed. It also undermines any case for reformulating historical questions as questions that must first be answered in the abstract, the answer then being applied to the historical record. If we cannot generate a persuasive account of the link between revolution and war by posing the problem as an abstract question and then testing the answer against (something identified as) the historical record, then surely we must pose the problem as a historical question, answered by exploring the in which revolution did and did not lead to war? Indeed, how else can the link possibly be discovered? For to insist that the question "why did the French revolution result in war?" is a historical question is not to say that theory has no role in answering it: like all historical questions, it can only be answered by drawing on theoretical insights (though these will often, in practice, be implicit or unspecified). Theory should not be construed as something that can be tested against history, but rather as part of history: it is what enables historical questions to be answered.

In order to facilitate improved dialogue with international historians, therefore, Walt's question must be (re)formulated as a historical question, such that he is no longer asking "how can I improve on neorealism?", but rather "how *does* revolution lead to increased security competition and thence to war?". This, in turn, requires an attitude towards theory which allows historical questions to be asked. For such questions will be best answered only when the inquirer has at her disposal as many theoretical resources as possible and, just as importantly, the ability to discard them as easily as they are picked up. Bringing theory back into the Theory/ History nexus means thinking of it as a flexible resource, rather than as a determinate source of answers.

Walt is unusual amongst realist theorists in his commitment to the development of historical narratives as an explicit research objective. A more typical example of realist

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<sup>60</sup> See Adam R. C. Humphreys, 'The Heuristic Application of Explanatory Theories in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* (forthcoming).

practices in dealing with history is evident in Schweller's *Deadly Imbalances*. Schweller states that, in writing the book, his 'constant purpose' was 'to explain the Second World War, to understand what happened and why'.<sup>61</sup> Although this makes it sound as if he is asking a historical question, Schweller's approach is deeply ahistorical. Rather than approaching the historical evidence with a range of theoretical resources to hand, but also with an open mind, he seeks to build a theory from which historical narratives can be directly read off. Thus his declared aim becomes 'to offer a new, structurally informed interpretation of the origins of World War II and to devise a systems theory that yields determinate ... predictions'.<sup>62</sup> He acknowledges that his theory 'does not explain everything' and that 'modern science will never devise a theoretical masterkey of history', but aims, nevertheless, to use his theory 'to offer a new explanation for the pattern and sequence of events as we know them'.<sup>63</sup>

Schweller's theoretical starting point is that the structure of the pre-war international system 'was tripolar – not multipolar, as commonly believed'.<sup>64</sup> However, he acknowledges that structure is only a permissive cause and that, as 'historians are quick to point out', complex historical events like WW2 also 'have specific causes'.<sup>65</sup> He infers from this that any interpretation of the origins of WW2 must 'include the particular interests and goals of the major actors as specific causes that supplement the more general causes and ... provide greater determinateness to the explanation'.<sup>66</sup> He therefore amends neorealism in two ways. First, he measures the distribution of capabilities 'not only by the number of Great Powers but also by their relative size', that is, he distinguishes between poles, lesser great powers, middle powers and small states.<sup>67</sup> Second, he differentiates great powers according to their interests, identifying five categories: unlimited-aims revisionists, limited-aims revisionists, indifference towards the status quo, weak support for the status quo (willing to accept limited peaceful change), and strong support for the status quo.<sup>68</sup> This allows him to consider a broader range of state strategies than does neorealism and also to develop a typology of states differentiated by both capabilities and interests.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances*, ix.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> See *ibid.*, 66-75, 85.

Having established his theoretical framework, Schweller's historical starting point is that, '[a]ware of the tripolar structure of the international system, Hitler constructed a grand strategy to destroy the other two poles, Russia and the United States, and thereby establish German global mastery'.<sup>70</sup> However, his ensuing discussion is not designed to contribute to the historiographical debate over the extent of Hitler's pursuit of world dominion, but rather to identify evidence that supports his theory: his explanatory aim is not to *discover* what happened, but rather to justify a particular interpretation of what is treated as a pre-existing historical record, thereby demonstrating the utility of his theory. Yet this is easier said than done, for although Schweller describes himself as 'trading neorealism's parsimony ... for greater richness and more determinate hypotheses', he does not, in practice, infer clearly identified hypotheses from well articulated assumptions.<sup>71</sup> Rather, his theoretical chapters first discuss what might *plausibly* occur given various distributions of power within tripolar systems and second explore *possible* state strategies.<sup>72</sup> Nowhere does Schweller predict how, under particular structural conditions, particular combinations of state interests will generate war.

In practice, Schweller's theory functions as a heuristic resource: by focusing on particular questions, developing a conceptual vocabulary, and highlighting certain empirical foci, it facilitates a distinctive approach to the subject matter, but without determining the precise content of his explanatory claims. Indeed, Schweller's principal achievement was to show how neorealism's conceptual vocabulary may be expanded. However, his efforts to demonstrate the utility of his alternative vocabulary sometimes raise more questions than they answer. For example, he tries to explain Stalin's pursuit of a rapprochement with Germany by arguing that Stalin needed to prevent an Anglo-Franco-German alliance.<sup>73</sup> Whatever its historical veracity, this idea is hard to reconcile with his theoretical account of the alliance choices that states of varying capability and interests are likely to make: in his typology, it is unclear how an alliance of a dove (Britain), a hawk (France) and a wolf (Germany) could come about. If the missing piece of the jigsaw is that those states shared an ideological antipathy toward the USSR, then it is unclear how this would fit into his theoretical story.

Like Walt, therefore, Schweller is unable to make a compelling case for the historical utility of his theory. Once again, the underlying problem is that he asks a non-historical

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>72</sup> See *ibid.*, chapters 2-3.

<sup>73</sup> See *ibid.*, 165.

question, rooted in an implausible conception of the Theory/History nexus. Despite his rhetorical commitment to understanding "what happened and why", Schweller's principal claim, in his conclusion, is to have developed a theory which 'yields more varied and determinate predictions about system dynamics and state behaviour and richer explanations of concrete historical cases than does Waltz's theory'.<sup>74</sup> In other words, the question he asks is not "what happened and why?", but "does my theory of the balance of interests allow me to interpret what I am going to treat as a pre-existing set of facts better than Waltz's theory of the balance of power does?". He has, in short, translated a historical question into a purely theoretical question, indicating a belief that Theory and History are distinct and separate enterprises and that the function of theory is to interpret a pre-existing historical record. This prevents genuinely historical questions from being asked, for whenever what looks like a historical question is posed, the answer is, in fact, already determined: the actual question asked is not "how is this episode best understood?", but "what evidence can be found to support this theory?".<sup>75</sup>

Even if we construe Schweller's theory as a heuristic resource, the narrowness of his approach limits its explanatory scope. For example, his claim that tripolarity 'needs to be taken into account in explaining the alliance patterns and foreign-policy strategies of the major powers' indicates a rather narrow vision of what a historical account of the origins of WW2 might look like. Nevertheless, the fact that his theory stands in indeterminate relation to his explanatory claims brings his actual practice much closer to that of most historians than we might expect. What is required in order to facilitate more productive dialogue with international historians is for him to rethink the nature and purpose of theory. Theory is not something that is developed in isolation from history, and from which answers to historical questions are read off. Rather, it is a resource without which no historical explanation can be developed, but which must be as flexible as possible. Only if realists can be persuaded to think of theory in this way can they begin to ask genuinely historical questions, that is, to ask not "which of these two theories is better?", but "what happened and why?".

## **Improving Dialogue in the Theory/History Nexus**

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 184-5.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Snyder's response to Lieber's review of new historiography on the origins of WW1. Jack Snyder and Keir A. Lieber, 'Correspondence: Defensive Realism and the "New" History of World War I', *International Security* 33, no. 1 (2008): 174-85.

In debates about the relationship between IR and History, neither realists nor their critics allow dialogue to take place. Realists, whatever their stated aims, invariably ask ahistorical questions which imply that Theory and History are distinct and separate enterprises. This separation is reproduced in many of the criticisms levelled against them: they are said to develop ahistorical theories (and/or to produce bad history) *because* they are theorists and hence not serious about history. Recent attempts to facilitate a more productive dialogue have, in general, failed to get much beyond a debate about what does or does not distinguish theorists from historians.<sup>76</sup> The consequence is that, whatever the conclusions reached about the proper relationship between Theory and History, IR theorists and international historians tend, in practice, to conduct separate conversations about the same episodes, thus failing to meet even minimal standards of dialogue. In order for theorists and historians who are examining the same episodes to be able to have more productive conversations, they have to believe that they are participating in the same explanatory enterprise. In other words, they have to be asking the same *types* of questions: questions about what happened and why.

One problem with the work of most realist theorists who carry out historical case studies, therefore, is the lack of clarity in the questions they ask. In some cases, as with Schweller, although the declared intention is to ask what happened and why, the real purpose is clearly to demonstrate the superiority of the author's preferred theoretical approach. In other cases, as with Walt, there appears to be a greater commitment to understanding what happened and why, but implicit assumptions are built into the question asked about what the purpose of asking it is and about what kind of contribution theory will make to that objective. These implicit assumptions need to be spelled out more clearly. For example, if Walt's aim is to explain the link between revolution and war, then what assumptions is he making about how inquiry must proceed? Is he asking a general historical question, such as "under what circumstances do revolutions lead to war?", or a more precisely specified but not ahistorical question, such as "what factors recur in situations in which revolutions lead to war?", or an ahistorical question, such as "can I use instances of revolutions leading to war as evidence for the superiority of balance-of-threat over balance-of-power theory?"?

The underlying cause of the lack of specification in the questions that realists ask is confusion about the kind of contribution that theory can make to historical explanation. As with Zakaria, realists often distinguish between a complete historical account and a first-cut theory. The thought here is that historical accounts are concerned only with the particularity

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<sup>76</sup> See especially Elman and Elman (eds.), *Bridges and Boundaries*.

of specific cases, whereas theory should be concerned with the universe of cases: although a historical account of a specific case may be fuller than that which can be derived from a first-cut theory, the utility of the theory resides in its applicability to all cases of that type.<sup>77</sup> This is a misleading thought, however, for if the first-cut theory cannot generate accurate accounts of the individual cases, then it certainly cannot be said to explain the universe of cases. Once again, the confusion derives from a misunderstanding of the Theory/History nexus. Realists believe that Theory and History are separate enterprises, with the function of theory being to explain an independently identified historical record. Consequently, they also believe that in order satisfactorily to explain a historical episode, rather than simply to give an account of it, one must develop a theory which shows that episode to be an instance of a broader class of such episodes. Theory, therefore, should stand in determinate relation to the historical record: the explanation should be read off the theory, the explanatory burden being to show that the episode is indeed an instance of a class of episodes all explicable in the same way.

This is not how theory contributes to historical explanation, even amongst realists. Theory is a resource that may be brought to problems: it is not a repository of determinate explanations. It arms the researcher with causal stories that *may* be applicable to the episode in question; it also, thereby, helps to construct the historical record. The historian's task is to determine which story or combination of stories generates the most plausible account of what happened and why. In order to facilitate this, the historian will wish to enter into her inquiries armed with as many theoretical resources as possible, enabling her to try different stories for size. Insofar as the task of the theorist may be distinguished from that of the historian, therefore, it is not to develop a single over-arching causal story from which historical explanations may be directly derived, but rather to generate as wide a range of theoretical resources as possible.<sup>78</sup> For the purpose of theory is not to prescribe an answer, but to enable one to be formulated by indicating what sorts of factors to examine. Whilst realists continue to seek to develop theories from which historical explanations may be read off, productive dialogue with international historians is all but precluded.

The fault, however, does not lie solely with theorists. Historians, too, are guilty of obscuring how theory contributes to historical explanation. Gaddis accepts that theory may not be what most historians *think* they do', but suggests, nevertheless, that many are 'closet

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<sup>77</sup> See Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*, 8.

<sup>78</sup> See Rudra Sil and Peter J. Katzenstein, 'Analytical Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics: Reconfiguring Problems and Mechanisms Across Research Traditions', *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 2 (2010): 411-31.

theorists': he argues that few historians 'would deny the need for coherence, generalization, and explanation in the writing and teaching of their subject'.<sup>79</sup> The problem arises partly because of how we think about theory: if it denotes the attempt to build a single, over-arching causal story, then historians are not theorists, but if it denotes those resources which are brought to historical problems and which help to classify and organize what is found, then they certainly at least draw on theories. Another part of the problem is that the narrative form in which many historians present their conclusions may obscure the role of theoretical ideas in helping them to reach those conclusions.<sup>80</sup> All historians employ a process of reasoning in which they reduce big questions, for example about the origins of WW1, to a sequence of smaller questions that zero in on key factors. This process will, explicitly or implicitly, draw on theory, though it may not draw on "a theory".<sup>81</sup>

Productive dialogue between IR theorists and international historians may therefore require a move away from thinking of competing "theories", in favour of thinking of "theory" as a resource, consisting of whatever implicit and explicit more or less well worked out ideas and commitments that investigators bring to their problems. The intellectual rationale for seeking to develop "a theory" is that it will be transferrable across cases. This not only gives it great explanatory power, but also ensures against data-fitting (the construction of any old story that fits the facts of each particular case). However, the inability of Zakaria, Walt and Schweller to produce the kinds of theories that can generate plausible explanations across a range of cases, allied to the fact that, despite this failing, their theories have obvious heuristic value, suggests that the costs of pursuing strict replicability may outweigh the benefits.<sup>82</sup> "Theory", in the form of the beliefs we bring to problems about how the world works, may facilitate certain kinds of stories and constrain others, but it cannot be right to demand that stories are directly transferrable across cases simply because "a theory" which cannot itself generate plausible explanations classifies those cases together. Theorists must be willing to

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<sup>79</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, 'In Defense of Particular Generalization: Rewriting Cold War History, Rethinking International Relations Theory', in *Bridges and Boundaries*, eds. Elman and Elman, 302-3.

<sup>80</sup> The importance of the narrative form to historical explanation is the subject of a long-standing debate in the philosophy of history. See W. H. Dray, 'On the Nature and Role of Narrative in Historiography', *History and Theory* 10, no. 2 (1971): 153-71.

<sup>81</sup> For an example of an attempt to make this process of reasoning explicit, see Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*, chapter 4.

<sup>82</sup> Kaufman, for example, argues that, by 'trying to find the one big theory that explains everything', Copeland places more weight on his theory than it can bear. Robert G. Kaufman, 'On the Uses and Abuses of History in International Relations Theory: Dale Copeland's *The Origins of Major War*', *Security Studies* 10, no. 4 (2001): 182.

reject approaches which generate implausible historical stories, rather than excusing this failing by distinguishing Theory from History.

The continuing force of the nomothetic ideal as a reconstructed logic for theoretical inquiry in IR militates against any move towards thinking in terms of "theory" rather than competing "theories".<sup>83</sup> Wohlforth argues that the desire to generate theories which apply to the universe of cases of a certain type results in a failure to 'articulate theoretical arguments that *can* be advanced by the accumulation of historical evidence'.<sup>84</sup> This desire also contributes to a disciplinary practice of defining and distinguishing theoretical schools in terms of their core assumptions, the implication being that distinctive hypotheses should be inferred from those assumptions and tested. This practice places pressure on theorists such as Zakaria and Walt to claim that their findings do precisely fit a pre-determined story, rather than to show greater humility in debating the merits and limitations of their preferred approaches. The underlying problem may be a desire to justify IR's identity as a discipline, as manifested in an insistence on asking questions about things in general rather than about things in particular.<sup>85</sup>

The prospects for improved dialogue between IR theorists and international historians should not, however, be understated. Four concrete steps would facilitate the required change in how theorists conceive of the contribution that theory makes to historical explanation. First, both theorists and historians must be encouraged to be more explicit about where their questions come from and what is assumed in them. Second, theorists must recognize that their theories are typically drawn upon as heuristic resources and, consequently, that theoretical pluralism should be encouraged. Third, those IR theorists who conduct historical case studies must recognize that it is always the narrative that carries the explanatory weight, not the theory with which it may be associated. Fourth, and as a corollary of the other three, IR theorists must accept a pragmatic account of how competing explanations are evaluated.

All questions arise in a context: we ask questions because we find things puzzling and hope, by asking a particular question, to understand something that we did not understand before. One of the chief differences between IR theorists and international historians is this context: they read different books and journals, attend different conferences, workshops and

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<sup>83</sup> See Humphreys, 'The Heuristic Application of Explanatory Theories in IR'.

<sup>84</sup> William C. Wohlforth, 'A Certain Idea of Science: How International Relations Theory Avoids Reviewing the Cold War', in *Reviewing the Cold War: Approaches, Interpretations, Theory*, ed. Odd Arne Westad (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 130.

<sup>85</sup> See Humphreys, 'Beyond the Nomothetic-Idiographic Distinction'. The solution may be to think of IR as a field rather than as a discipline.

seminars, and interact with different people. Moreover, it is common to frame research by situating it in its context, that is, by clarifying what is already (thought to be) known in the area in question and how the new research will make a distinctive contribution. It is less common to probe the assumptions that underlie what we think we already know. Yet it is these assumptions that do much to prevent productive dialogue between IR theorists and international historians. For example, *Deadly Imbalances* is a response not to a debate in the historical literature about the origins of WW2, but to Schweller's belief that existing realist theories are unable to generate plausible accounts of the origins of WW2. Because this is the context in which Schweller's interest arises, the question he asks is already implicitly defined as one about how to improve on existing realist theories, rather than as one about the origins of WW2 per se.

This suggests that careful reflection on the context out of which our questions arise and on what is, therefore, assumed in them may help to facilitate productive dialogue by revealing when theorists and historians who seem to be engaged with the same subject matter are asking compatible or incompatible questions. It may also help theorists to recognize when their questions imply implausible conceptions of the Theory/History nexus. For only if Schweller is able to recognize that the context to which he responds is one in which Theory is treated as a separate enterprise from History will it ever be possible for him to overcome that handicap. This may be easier said than done: the need for IR theorists to identify with a particular theoretical school in order to be accepted onto conference panels, publish in certain journals, and achieve tenure provides disincentives for serious critique of the methodological assumptions implicit in established approaches. There is, nevertheless, obvious benefit in achieving clarity about what questions are really being asked and about which of these are conducive to productive dialogue.

A second important step would be for IR theorists to recognize that their theories are typically drawn upon as heuristic resources. This would undermine use of the nomothetic-idiographic distinction to characterize the relationship between IR and History: in practice, the two disciplines use theories in similar ways.<sup>86</sup> It also suggests that theoretical pluralism should be encouraged, for two reasons. First, if theory is a resource that is drawn upon as and when required, then more is preferable to less. Second, if the relationship between theories and substantive explanatory claims is indeterminate, then there is no reason to privilege those theories which claim to be sufficient, on their own, to generate explanations. Buzan and

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<sup>86</sup> See *ibid.*

Little argue that we should think of stories in IR as being told in parallel, rather than in opposition, their point being that there is a division of labour between theories that focus on different kinds of problems.<sup>87</sup> This is significant because for a move away from "theories" and towards "theory" to be productive, it will require a focus on developing ideas that may be tried for size in a variety of cases, making theories both complementary and competitive: competitive because in any single case we are likely to have a preference for one kind of story over another, but also complementary in the sense that we are likely to find different kinds of stories persuasive in different cases.

It is therefore important to consider what makes theorists' case studies more or less persuasive. A belief that Theory and History are separate enterprises implies that the task of History is to uncover the historical record which theory will explain.<sup>88</sup> However, there are no unvarnished facts: as Smith observes, history is less an 'independent body of evidence' than 'a patchwork of often incongruous facts and more or less plausible inferences, interpretations, and impressions'.<sup>89</sup> Consequently, a case study cannot be persuasive because the theory on which it draws makes sense of a pre-existing body of evidence, showing how the antecedent conditions fitted the theory's assumptions and thus that the outcome was inevitable. On the contrary, the theory always helps to construct the history, either by helping the theorist to decide which facts are relevant or by helping her to decide which historiography to draw upon. A case study is therefore not strictly a test of the theory. At best, it is an illustration of the kind of historical story that the theory helps to tell. Crucially, therefore, the explanatory weight is carried by the narrative itself, rather than by the theory with which it is associated.<sup>90</sup> A particular historical story should not be privileged just because it was constructed through a particular historical lens: the only important question is whether the theorist has managed to

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<sup>87</sup> Barry Buzan and Richard Little, 'Why International Relations has Failed as an Intellectual Project and What to Do About It', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 30, no. 1 (2001): 34.

<sup>88</sup> Associated with this view is a contention that historians draw on theories without admitting it: that one of the disagreements between historians and theorists concerns 'how explicit scholars should be about the analytical assumptions and causal propositions upon which their explanations' are based. Jack S. Levy, 'Explaining Events and Developing Theories: History, Political Science, and the Analysis of International Relations', in *Bridges and Boundaries*, eds. Elman and Elman, 51.

<sup>89</sup> Smith, *History and IR*, 2.

<sup>90</sup> See Thomas Heilke, 'Realism, Narrative, and Happenstance: Thucydides' Tale of Brasidas', *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 1 (2004): 121-38.

tell a plausible story about the episode in question.<sup>91</sup> This, if nothing else, should persuade theorists to cast their theoretical nets more widely.

These three steps are designed to help IR theorists to rethink how theory contributes to historical explanation and to enable them to ask genuinely historical questions, thereby facilitating more productive dialogue with international historians. However, they carry an important epistemological corollary: a pragmatic approach to how explanatory claims are evaluated. If theory is a resource that may be discarded as easily as it is picked up, then we may wonder what warrant we can have for saying that one story is more plausible than another. The answer can only be that stories must satisfy intersubjectively accepted standards of evidence and reasoning. These standards establish two principles. First, an explanatory claim must make sense of its subject matter in a way that answers whatever question is in fact being asked about it. Second, the claim must either fit with important aspects of what we think we already know (both about the matter in question and about the world in general) or it must challenge what we thought we knew in a way that stimulates further inquiry. Thus, to paraphrase Dewey: what it means to say that we know something is not that it is established with a certainty that precludes the possibility of future revision, but that it is accepted in the sense (or to the extent) that it may be drawn upon as a resource in further inquiry.<sup>92</sup>

If IR theorists are to ask genuinely historical questions, therefore, they must recognize that the judgement of the expert community is the arbiter of knowledge claims.<sup>93</sup> This is at odds with the epistemological position that underpins realists' differentiation of Theory from History: that differentiation implies that knowledge is achieved by demonstrating that explanatory claims (in the form of theories) are supported by the historical record. Yet given that realist IR theorists are unable to develop theories which fulfil the requirements of this epistemological model, and given that they still wish to make knowledge claims, a call for a pragmatic approach to historical explanation is not so much a demand for a radical change in explanatory practices, as a demand that IR theorists accept their existing practices for what they are. If IR theories are in fact drawn upon as heuristic resources, then the only grounds on which they may be said to be useful is that they facilitate the development of substantive explanatory claims the plausibility of which is accepted by the relevant expert community.

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<sup>91</sup> See Humphreys, 'The Heuristic Application of Explanatory Theories in International Relations'.

<sup>92</sup> See Jonathan B. Isacoff, 'On the Historical Imagination of International Relations: The Case for a "Deweyan Reconstruction"', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 31, no. 3 (2002): 620.

<sup>93</sup> See Humphreys, 'Beyond the Nomothetic-Idiographic Distinction'.

## Conclusion

A minimal criterion for meaningful dialogue between IR theorists and international historians is that scholars who are analyzing the same episodes must be able to contribute productively to each other's work. This is only possible if they are asking the same kinds of questions, that is, if they conceive of themselves as contributing to a common explanatory project in which Theory and History are necessarily intertwined.

The role of theory in constructing our understanding of the world around us is now widely accepted in IR, as it is in the philosophy of social science. Any conception of the relationship between the enterprises of Theory and History in which theory is held to explain an independently identifiable historical record is therefore untenable. However, to insist that Theory and History are intertwined is not to deny that any meaningful distinction between the disciplines of IR and History can be drawn. There is a clear institutional differentiation in academic departments and publication outlets. There is, moreover, an important potential division of labour: there will always be some scholars who are more interested in developing the kinds of theoretical resources that may be drawn upon in theoretically-informed historical research and there will always be some scholars who are more interested in exploring specific historical problems, drawing on theoretical resources as required. What should be rejected is any distinction between IR and History which implies that the two disciplines are engaged in different kinds of explanatory enterprise.

The relationship between IR and History is bound up with the questions asked in each discipline, for they embody conceptions of the Theory/History nexus. This suggests that many instances of what appear to be substantive disagreements may in fact revolve around how questions are formulated: questions that imply that what is required to answer them is either purely abstract or purely empirical work will not be easily reconciled either with each other or with questions that embody a more realistic understanding of the Theory/History nexus. An analysis of what questions are in fact being asked is therefore a key component of methodological inquiry. Where IR theorists turn what are really historical questions into avowedly non-historical theoretical questions, this process must be identified and reversed, for it prevents theoretically-informed historical research from taking place. In order for such reformulation to be accepted by IR theorists, it will also be necessary to show how, as with

Walt and Schweller, theorists' initial formulation of their questions emerges out of a context in which the Theory/History nexus is misunderstood.

The potential for this to occur is greater than one might suspect given the influence, among explanatory theorists, of Waltz's commitment to Theory as an autonomous enterprise. This is because even realists such as Walt and Schweller fail, in practice, to live up to the conception of the Theory/History relationship implicit in how they formulate their questions. In fact, they, like other IR theorists, draw on their theories as heuristic resources.<sup>94</sup> What is required, therefore, is that they recognize the nature of their own explanatory practices. This would allow the theorist's task to be understood more broadly, for if the important question is whether a theory facilitates the construction of a persuasive account of a particular episode, then this should incentivise theorists to cast their nets as widely as possible, whilst at the same time remaining committed to highlighting the most important issues and to developing the conceptual vocabularies required to organize empirical material. A false differentiation of Theory from History must not be allowed to excuse bad theory, just as it should not excuse a failure by historians to acknowledge their own theoretical commitments.

The key is to recognize that questions with historical content or implications can only be answered through theoretically-oriented historical research. Only if this is accepted will IR theorists also recognize that there is a common explanatory enterprise to which both they and international historians contribute and that this underpins the potential for productive dialogue between them. Then, perhaps, realists and other IR theorists will allow historical questions to be asked, and answered, *as* historical questions.

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<sup>94</sup> See Humphreys, 'The Heuristic Application of Explanatory Theories in IR'.