Chapter 1

Explaining Events and Developing Theories: History, Political Science, and the Analysis of International Relations

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Historians and social scientists generally agree that although they study the same social phenomena, they do so in different ways. There is less agreement, however, on precisely what those differences are. The dialogue between historians and sociologists, which has continued for a century, is reflected in a 1994 symposium in the British Journal of Sociology, and the contrasting views of diplomatic historians and international relations theorists are presented in a 1997 symposium in International Security.¹ In this essay I focus primarily on differences in how diplomatic historians and political scientists study international relations—and my references to “historians” and “political scientists” should be interpreted in this way—although many of my arguments apply to the discipline of political science as a whole or to the social sciences more generally.²

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2. Although some have argued that international relations constitutes a distinct field of study, many now argue that any gap in theory and method between international relations and other empirically oriented fields in political science—particularly American politics and comparative politics—had diminished by the late 1990s, as scholars have increasingly incorporated theories of domestic politics into theories of international relations. See Helen V. Milbrath, “Rationalizing Politics: The Emerging Synthesis of International, American, and Comparative Politics,” International Organization, Vol. 52, No. 4 (Autumn 1998), pp. 759–786.
The two disciplines are said to differ in subject matter, approaches to explanation, method, and form of presentation. Historians focus primarily on the past; international relations scholars, and political scientists more generally, aim to make theoretically informed and policy-relevant predictions about the future. Historians seek to understand single unique events, the milieus et moment; political scientists aim to generalize about classes of events and to construct theories that are valid across time and space. Historians tend to favor complex interpretations; political scientists aim for elegant and parsimonious causal explanations. Historians construct narrative-based explanations; political scientists construct theory-based explanations. Political scientists are explicit about their theoretical assumptions and causal argument; historians are more implicit.

Although scholars often treat each of these differences as polar extremes, they are best interpreted as ends of a continuum, along which many scholars would classify themselves somewhere in the middle. Taken together, however, these differences between history and political science produce such sharp contrasts that it is relatively easy to identify the disciplinary affiliation of most historians and political scientists. These scholars go through very different graduate training programs, to the extent that history departments rarely hire scholars trained as political scientists and political science departments rarely hire those trained as historians. Historians and political scientists generally attend different professional conferences and publish in different journals. These dissimilarities have generated distinct reward structures in the two disciplines, which in turn reinforce other differences between the disciplines.

In my own contribution to the 1997 International Security symposium on "History and Theory," I argued that although each discipline encompasses an enormous range of scholarship, and although the focus and methodologies of each discipline have changed significantly over time, the criterion that best defines the different "identities" of the two disciplines is a variation of the traditional distinction between idiographic and nomothetic orientations: the primary goal of historians is to describe, understand, and interpret individual events or a temporally and spatially bounded series of events, whereas the primary goal of political scientists is to generalize about the relationships between variables and, to the extent possible, construct law-like propositions about social behavior.

In this chapter I develop this argument and show that the idiographic/nomothetic distinction underlies many of the other criteria that scholars have advanced to identify differences between the disciplines—including the value of parsimonious explanations, the importance of primary sources, the value of predictions and policy relevance, the feasibility of universal laws, the nature of the scope conditions that limit theoretical generalizations, the different types of scope conditions that define the domain of the theory, and the role of covering laws in social explanation. Because the idiographic/nomothetic distinction subsumes these other criteria, it is far more useful than any single criterion, and provides a comprehensive and powerful framework for analyzing the differences between the two disciplines. I also consider the distinction between narrative-based explanations and theory-based explanations, and conclude that there are too many exceptions to make this a useful criterion for distinguishing between history and political science.

In highlighting the importance of the idiographic/nomothetic distinction, I emphasize that idiographic does not imply atheoretical, that it is necessary to distinguish between what scholars try to explain and how they explain it, and that the two disciplines differ in how they use theory, not whether they use theory. To say that historians attempt to explain events does not imply that they are atheoretical, for historians sometimes use law-like propositions to explain those events. I also refine my earlier argument by acknowledging that historians often generalize. Most of these generalizations refer to particular countries or periods, whereas political scientists' generalizations refer to certain theoretically defined conditions. In other words, historical generalizations are bounded by temporal and spatial scope conditions, whereas political scientists' generalizations are bounded by analytical scope conditions.

There is a smaller set of historians who claim to generalize beyond the spatial and temporal bounds of their historical analyses, but here too they differ from political scientists. The difference is based on the distinct...
between the logic of discovery and the logic of confirmation, between constructing generalizations and validating them against the empirical evidence. Political scientists not only generalize from their observed data to a more broadly defined class of phenomena; they give primacy to the question of how to test those generalizations empirically and to the task of constructing research designs for that purpose. Historians sometimes generalize but they rarely give explicit attention to the research designs and methodologies through which their generalizations might be empirically confirmed.

Before developing this argument about the differences between history and political science in their study of international relations, it is necessary to recognize that neither discipline is monolithic. There is substantial variation in the scholarship within each discipline at a given point of time, within each discipline across national boundaries, and within each discipline over time. This significantly complicates the task of identifying any single criterion that fully captures the fundamental differences between historians and political scientists in their study of international relations.

First, history and political science both incorporate an enormous range of scholarly research, to the extent that in many respects the variations in theoretical approaches and methodological orientations within each discipline may be as great as the variations between them. Diplomatic historians and international relations scholars have far more in common with each other—in terms of substance, epistemology, and methodology—than they do with many of their colleagues in other fields in their own disciplines. Diplomatic history has been less sensitive than other branches of history to changing theoretical orientations and methodological fads in the field, from the rise and fall of quantitative history to the rise of postmodernism. It has consistently insisted on the empirical validation of its interpretations and in the utility of narratives and primary sources for that purpose. These considerations lead Stephen Haber, David Kennedy, and Stephen Krasner to argue that diplomatic historians and international relations scholars are really "brothers under the skin." It is important to emphasize, however, that this idea of a fraternity

7. The international relations field in political science has generally reflected various trends in theory and method in the discipline as a whole, from quantitative methods to rational choice and game theory to the growing influence of constructivism.


9. While the study of international relations in the United Kingdom is more historical than it is in the United States, there is in many respects a greater separation between historians and international relations scholars in Britain than in the United States. See Christopher Hill, "History and International Relations," in Steve Smith, ed., International Relations: British and American Perspectives (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), pp. 126-145.


methods for discovering that knowledge—than in 1980s, by which time the decline of quantitative history and the "revival of narrative" had moved history further away from political science. The two disciplines are even further apart today, after the growing influence of postmodernism and the "linguistic turn" in history, and after the further spread of quantitative methods and particularly game-theoretic models in political science. Comparisons between the disciplines would have looked much different in the nineteenth century, when the Rankean focus on explaining unique events contrasted sharply with the attempts by Marx, de Tocqueville, Darkheim, Weber, and other sociologists to construct historically grounded generalizations about social structures and processes. Thus any comparisons between history and political science may be historically contingent. These significant variations in the scholarship within each discipline—at any given point in time, over time, and across countries—complicate the task of identifying any essential differences between diplomatic history and international relations. Nevertheless, the central tendencies of the two disciplines differ, and most historians and political scientists agree that they differ. I argue that the one criterion that best captures the differences between most leading historians and most leading international relations scholars—at least in the United States—that best reflects the scholarship that is most valued within each discipline, that involves the fewest significant exceptions, and that underlies many of the other criteria, is the idea that historians attempt to explain individual events or series of events, whereas political scientists attempt to construct generalizations (universal or contingent) about classes of events and to test those generalizations empirically. This argument represents a slight modification of the traditional distinction between idiographic and nomothetic approaches to the study of social phenomena.

The reader should understand that my generalizations about historiography and political science refer to the central tendencies of the most influential "mainstream" scholars within each discipline, and that the large variances around these central tendencies mean that there will be numerous individual exceptions to my arguments. I limit my argument to the United States because of significant differences across the Atlantic.

The Idiographic/Nomothetic Distinction

In the late nineteenth century, Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert emphasized the contrast between the idiographic method of the historical and social sciences (Geisteswissenschaften) and the nomothetic method of the natural sciences (Naturwissenschaften). The first aims to explain or understand unique sequences of events and the second seeks to develop explanatory laws. After social science diverged from history by adopting positivistic natural science as its disciplinary model, scholars began to apply the idiographic and nomothetic concepts to distinguish between history and the social sciences. Among contemporary political scientists, Joseph Nye asserts that "history is the study of events that have happened only once; political science is the effort to generalize about them." Similarly, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita argues that "the social scientist is more likely to emphasize general explanations of social phenomena, while the historian is more likely to emphasize particularistic, unique features of individual episodes of social phenomena." Stephen Van Evera argues that political scientists consider the task of explaining individual cases as "the domain of historians." Sociologists make similar distinctions: Seymour Martin Lipset argues that "the task of the sociologist is to formulate general hypotheses . . . and to test them . . . . History must be concerned with the analysis of the particular set of events or processes." Edgar Kiser and Martin Hechter note that "historians' methodological stress the accuracy and descriptive power of the event, whereas political scientists stress the regularity and explanatory power of the event" (1984).
completeness of narratives about particular events . . . the events they seek to describe and explain are both unique and complex ." Robert Bierstedt notes that "history, as an idiographic, is interested in the unique, the particular, the individual; sociology, as nomothetic, in the recurrent, the general, the universal ." 17

Similar views can be found among philosophers. Schopenhauer argued that "the sciences . . . speak a ways of kinds, history always of individuals." Isaihl Berlin explains that "in history we more often than not attach greater credence to particular facts than to general propositions" and that "the purpose of historians . . . is to capture the unique pattern and peculiar characteristics of its particular subject." Michael Oakeshott insists on the "absolute impossibility of deriving from history any generalization of the kind which belong to a social science," noting that "where comparison begins, as a method of generalization, history ends." 19

This idiographic conception of what most historians do is also shared by many historians. In 1848 H.H. Vaughan stated that the first quality of a good historian was the "principle of attraction to the facts," and Leopold von Ranke argued that the aim of historians was to discover the unique in every event. For Ranke, "if generalizations were forced upon history . . . all that which is interesting about history would disappear" and "history would lose all scientific footing." 19

Among contemporary historians, Lawrence Stone, citing Pierre Chaunu's comment that "the discipline of history is above all a discipline of context," argues that history "deals with a particular set of actors at a particular time in a particular place," Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., contends that

Many professional historians—perhaps most—reject the idea that generalization is the goal of history. We all respond, in Marc Bloch's phrase, to 'the thrill of learning singular things.' Indeed, it is the commitment to concrete reconstruction as against abstract generalization—to life as against laws—which distinguishes history from sociology. 20

Other historians recognize this as an accurate description of most historiography but argue that historians ought to be more nomothetic in orientation. In 1946, the Committee on Historiography of the Social Science Research Council concluded that "facts have become detached from any hypothesis or interpretation," and urged historians to generalize more by constructing testable hypotheses. 21 Similarly, Gordon Craig contends that historians should "overcome our congenital distrust of theory and our insistence upon the uniqueness of the historical event . . . and treat unique cases as members of a class or type of phenomenon." John Lewis Gaddis faults many historians in the security field for their lack of comparative focus and for their tendency "to preoccupy themselves with the particular." 22

Some have interpreted the idiographic/nomothetic distinction and its application to history and social science to suggest that history, unlike the social sciences, tends to be atheoretical. This can be misleading. We should not confuse the argument that (I) historians aim to explain particular sequences of events, whereas social scientists aim to generalize about classes of events with the assertion that (2) historians base their explanations on factors unique to an individual event or episode whereas political scientists base their explanations on theoretical models. These are two different statements. The first concerns the question of what we are trying to explain and the second concerns the question of how we explain it. I am not arguing that most historians are atheoretical. Rather, I am arguing that historians and political scientists tend to use theory in different ways.


historical case studies, but the cases are vehicles for theory development rather than ends in themselves. Significantly fewer rewards go to those who use theory to guide historical analyses for the primary purpose of illuminating the case (which is quite common), and even less to those who do "descriptive" (affecto-theoretical) case studies (which has become less common).

For political scientists, the worst thing that can be said of a dissertation, job talk, or article is that it is primarily descriptive or that it makes little theoretical contribution, even if it adds to our body of empirical knowledge. For historians, the worst thing that can be said is that a historical study or interpretation is incorrect, that it doesn't fit the facts, tie them together, and make them comprehensible. Political scientists are less concerned about "getting the facts right," and believe that history can be useful even if they are descriptively inaccurate. Historians are less concerned about explicitly specifying the assumptions and causal propositions underlying their historical interpretations.

Just as political scientists complain that historians are not theoretical enough, or at least not explicit enough about their underlying assumptions and causal propositions, historians complain about political scientists' use (or abuse) of history. They argue that political scientists allow their theories to take priority over the evidence, focus on those historical

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25. Van Evera (Guide to Method, p. 75), who believes that case-explaining case studies are an important but neglected activity in political science, states that "political scientists seldom do case-explaining case studies, partly because they define the task of case-explaining as the domain of historians." Van Evera understates the number of case-explaining analyses in political science but accurately reflects the relatively low value attached to them in the discipline.

26. The clearest examples are Kenneth N. Waltz, Men, the State, and War (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), and Waltz, Theory of International Politics (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979).
events that confirm their theories, and ignore the larger context in which events occur and in the absence of which those events cannot be fully understood. This is closely related to the charge by historians that the emphasis on constructing and testing theories in political science, reinforced by the hierarchic structure in the discipline, leads political scientists to try so hard to confirm their theories that they are unreceptive to contrary evidence. Historians contrast what they regard as the rigid use of "theory" in political science with the more flexible "hypotheses" (or theoretical "hunches") that guide historical research but that can be abandoned in the face of conflicting evidence.30 Historians’ conceptions of the rigid or dogmatic use of theory in political science are reflected in Isaiah Berlin’s commentary that "addiction to theory—being doctrinaire—is a term of abuse when applied to historians; yet it is not an insult if applied to a natural scientist.31

One can undoubtedly find many cases in which political scientists cling rigidly to their theories in the face of substantial contrary evidence, or in which they focus only on those historical cases that fit their theories. But one can also find many examples of historians guilty of the same rigidities and biases in their case selection and interpretations.32 Good scholars in each discipline, however, are sensitive to disconfirming evidence and critical of the hypotheses who are not, and the question of whether one discipline is more guilty than the other of ignoring inconsistent evidence is less important than questions relating to the different criteria for disconfirmation in the two disciplines given their different scholarly purposes, methodologies, and data.

THE ISSUE OF OBJECTIVITY

Interdisciplinary debates about the proper role of theory are often unproductive because scholars use "theory" to mean many different things, ranging from a logically connected set of propositions deduced from

axiomatic assumptions to the implicit analytical assumptions that guide scholars’ worldviews and interpretations. With regard to the latter, it is clear that it is now the conventional wisdom in both history and political science that all empirical observations are filtered through a priori mental frameworks, that all facts are "theory-laden." This is accepted by both practitioners and philosophers of social science and history. As Goethe wrote, “every fact is already a theory.”33

Political scientists and historians agree in principle that one’s theoretical preconceptions affect the question one asks to study, and the explanations that one constructs—of singular events as well as of more general patterns. J. David Singer, who constructed the most widely used data set in the study of international conflict, has repeatedly emphasized that data are "made" rather than that an "addiction to theory—being doctrinaire." Historicist E.H. Carr argues that facts are like "fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the fisherman catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use—these two factors being determined by the kind of fish that he wants to catch."34 The disagreement between historians and social scientists is not so much over the influence of theoretical preconceptions, but rather in how explicit scholars should be about the analytic assumptions and causal proposi-
tions upon which their explanations of social phenomena are based. Political scientists are far more concerned than historians about making their assumptions and causal propositions explicit.

Historians have not always believed that empirical facts are interpreted through intervening mental frameworks. The leading school of historiography by the later part of the nineteenth century was the "scientific history" of Leopold von Ranke and his followers. Ranke insisted that the aim of the historian was to show history "as it really was," to recreate the past that exists independently of the preconceptions sociology to that of the historian, and to achieve value-free, scientific certainty. The aim was not just to get the facts right, but to understand how discrete facts were interconnected. For Ranke this involved the hermeneutic method, the critical analysis of texts with particular emphasis on primary sources, including diplomatic documents, memoirs, diaries, letters, and the like.35

30. I thank David Fogelholm (private correspondence) for emphasizing this line of argument.
This view of understanding history "as it really was" is implicit in John Goldthorpe's argument that the distinctive difference between history and sociology (and by implication the social sciences more generally) is that historians discern evidence while sociologists invent evidence. We might call this the "Dragnet" conception of history: "Just the facts, ma'am, just the facts." Histories soon reacted against the Rankean ideal of an objective, value-free history. Critics pointed out that Rankean history assumed the centrality of the state and focused narrowly on political history to the exclusion of social, economic, and cultural history. Its methodology utilized national archives as its main sources. The substance of Rankean historiography varied from country to country, primarily in a way that reflected their separate political cultures, mythical national pasts, and perceived threats to the state. In Germany, for example, the opposition to social history was clearly linked to a narrative that reflected their separate political cultures, mythical national pasts, and perceived threats to the state. In Germany, for example, the opposition to social history was clearly linked to a narrative that reflected their separate political cultures, mythical national pasts, and perceived threats to the state.


The same change—of underestimating the role of theoretical preconceptions underlaying all observation and believing in the possibility of a value-free science—could be leveled against many strands of political science, particularly during the behavioral revolution in the 1960s. But just as Rankean epistemology has gone out of favor, so has the ahistorical "number-crunching" that characterized cruder forms of quantitative analysis.

The theoretical ideas subsumed in Ranke's Ausserzeitlich are still quite influential, both among realist international theorists and their counterparts in diplomatic history.

Iggers, New Directions, chap. 1. 39. For example, "progressive historians" in the United States reflected the democratic values of the progressive era. See, for example, Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, America in Misleague (New York: Macmillan, 1919). Most contemporary cultural and postmodern historians study the past "from the bottom up," from the perspective of the powerless, the sovereign, the marginalized, and with a clear normative bias in favor of those groups. For an argument on why the study of the "voiceless" lends itself to a postmodern orientation, see Haber, Kennedy, and Kretz, "Brothers Under the Skin," pp. 38–40. But this link is far from perfect. Some postmodernists study elites, and though it is true that it is difficult to apply Rankean methods in the absence of "documents," one can certainly study the powerless from a more positive orientation.”

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historical idealist perspective, argued that "history is a historian's expe-
rience. It is 'made' by nobody save the historian; to write history is the
only way of making it." Similarly, Carl Becker wrote that "the facts of
history do not exist for any historian till he creates them." Contemporary "constructivists" share this idealist perspective. So do postmodernists, but in a more extreme way. Postmodernists reject the possibility of objective knowledge because the very concepts the analyst uses to describe the world are fundamentally shaped by their cultural context, by power relationships, and by language. For postmodernists, language is a self-contained system that exists independently of its relation to the external world. The text does not reflect reality but instead constructs that reality. In Jacques Derrida's words, "there is nothing outside of the text." As Hayden White argues, "historical narratives are verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences." Postmodernists reject the distinction between fact and fiction, between history and rhetoric, and thus reject empirical accuracy as a criterion for the evaluation of theories.

E.H. Carr offered a powerful but balanced statement of the theory-
laden character of all empirical observation, rejecting the extremes of both Rankeans and historical idealists. Carr criticized the "fetishism of facts" in Rankean historiography and emphasized that all observation involves the "selective filtering of the facts." He also criticized the exclusive reliance on the documents, "the Ark of the Covenant in the temple of facts" in Rankean historiography. At the same time, however, Carr rejected the idealists' argument that empirical observations were entirely determined


43. This distinguishes postmodernists from "softer" constructivists, who recognize limitations on the transhistorical and transcultural validity of theoretical concepts but who are more open to the empirical validation of particular historical interpretations. The possibility of generalizing across cases is contested territory among constructivists (or interpretivists). Ted Hopf argues that "interpretivists are most hesitant to ever generalize across cases, and see even within-case generalizations as being problematic," but then goes on to emphasize the limits of particularism as well as universalism. See Ted Hopf, "The Limits of Interpreting Evidence" (Ohio State University, unpublished manuscript, 2000).
by theoretical preconceptions. Carr argued that "the historian is neither the humble slave nor the tyrannical master of his facts," and that history is "a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past."44

This middle ground between the Rankean positivist and historical idealist viewpoint is one with which many contemporary diplomatic historians and political scientists would feel quite comfortable. Haber, Kennedy, and Krasner argue that "the interplay of fact and theory has been the defining characteristic of the study of international politics. . . . Social behavior can be objectively observed even if it is based on inter-subjectively shared understanding." James Lee Ray and Bruce Russett argue that although "observations are inevitably theory-laden they are not theory-determined." Most political scientists would accept Carr's argument that the scholar engages in a "continuous process of molding his facts to his interpretation and his interpretation to his facts," that there is an unending dialogue between theory and evidence.45

The idiographic/nomothetic distinction—defined in terms of what is to be explained rather than how to explain it—underlies the logic of several of the other criteria of demarcation between the disciplines, including the relative preferences for parsimony, the role of primary and secondary sources, the importance of prediction and policy relevance, beliefs in the feasibility of universal laws, the nature of scope conditions of generalizations, and the role of covering laws. By linking these other criteria within an overarching framework, the idiographic/nomothetic distinction gains considerable analytic power.

PREFERENCES FOR PARSIMONY
Few would disagree that political scientists are far more interested than are historians in "parsimonious" theories and explanations. By this I mean that political scientists attempt to explain as much as possible with as little theoretical apparatus as possible. They prefer one theory to another if the first explains as much empirical phenomena as the second, but with fewer assumptions.46 Historians prefer "total" explanations that recognize the complexity in the world and attempt to explain much of that complexity in their interpretations in order to account for a set of events in their entirety.47

The nature of total explanations varies by historical school. For idealists, it involves verstehen, an empathetic understanding of the beliefs, emotions, intentions, reasoning, and very personality of the actors themselves in an attempt to understand the meanings individuals attached to their own actions.48 This is associated with the idea that the historian aims at understanding and interpretation rather than causal explanation.49 The concepts of total explanation and "understanding" take us far from the more parsimonious theorizing of most political science.50

Many political scientists also recognize complexity in the world, but attempt to abstract from that complexity to explain the most fundamental features of social phenomena. The preference for parsimony derives from the goal of theorizing about relationships between classes of events rather than explaining individual events, and the belief that theoretical generalization must be based on models that are considerably less complex than the world than they aim to represent. The more complex and nuanced an explanation, the less likely that it will "travel well" across cases. No two cases are exactly alike, and the more one explains what is unique to a

46. This is the conventional use of parsimony in political science. A theory is not parsimonious in the abstract but only relative to other theories that purport to explain the same phenomenon. Preferences for parsimonious theories go back to Occam’s
47. Razor from the fourteenth century and to Karl Popper’s argument that simpler theories are easier to falsify and consequently they contain more explanatory power. See Karl Popper, The Logic of Scientific Discovery (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963). In this view parsimony relates to the theorists that one constructs to explain the world, not to beliefs about the simplicity of the world itself, which is an alternative conceptualization of parsimony. This alternative view is adopted by Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), who refer to the first conception of parsimony as "maximizing leverage." See also the chapter by Jarvis in the volume.
48. As Eric Hobbsun argues in On History (New York: The New Press, 1997), p. 109, "basically all history aspires to what the French call ‘total history’." By this he means that "history . . . cannot decide to leave out any aspect of human history a priori . . . that ideally all aspects of an episode must be included in a historical explanation.
50. Historians themselves debate the utility of this distinction. See Roberts, Historical Explanation, chap. 11.
50. An important exception is constructionists, which shares an interest in the complex social contexts of human behavior and the meanings individuals attach to their actions. See Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, Explaining and Understanding International Relations (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), and Hofst, "The Limits of Interpreting Evidence,"
particular case, the less one can use the same conceptual apparatus to explain the essential features of another case.

This difference between historians and political scientists in their treatment of complexity has begun to narrow in some important respects. By the mid-1990s international relations theorists had begun to build more complexity into their models, with greater emphasis on interaction effects between variables at different levels of analysis; on uncertainty, unanticipated consequences, and nonlinear relationships; and on selection effects, reciprocal causation, and other forms of endogeneity, where the dependent variable has some impact on the independent variable.51 Although historians rarely refer explicitly to the concept of endogeneity, in some respects they have been more likely than political scientists to incorporate the role of endogeneity into their historical explanations. Historians have long argued that “everything is connected to everything else.” They have repeatedly criticized the simplistic tendencies of political scientists to speak in terms of “independent” and “dependent variables,” and to assume that historical “cases” are independent. Historians generally trace the historical roots of behavior further back in time, and they emphasize the non-independence of discrete events.52 On the other hand, political scientists have made important contributions by constructing models to deal with endogeneity effects in a more systematic way.53

Given their interest in constructing parsimonious theories and explanations, political scientists often complain that the nonparsimonious explanations of historians, area specialists, and others tend to be overdeterr


52. This implies that the standard assumptions underlying the statistical methods that political scientists commonly use are frequently violated. Political scientists have begun to devote increasing attention to this problem. On the issue of independent and dependent variables, see John Lewis Gaddis’s essay in this volume.


mined—in that the analyst advances more causes for an outcome than are needed to explain it. To the political scientist, this represents a failure to differentiate primary from secondary causal factors and diminishes the analytical power of the argument and the ability to generalize to other cases. Historians, on the other hand, often complain that the so-called parsimonious explanations of political scientists are underdetermined—they fail to capture the nuances of individual events or periods, and they also fail to explain the variation across historical episodes.54

It is important to note that overdetermined explanations are not equivalent to multicausal explanations.55 In overdetermined explanations, there are several factors, or sets of factors, that are individually sufficient for an outcome. In multicausal explanations, a set of factors may be jointly sufficient for a particular outcome. The two are not the same. In the first situation, but not the second, the absence of one causal factor would leave the outcome unchanged. In fact, political scientists would be quite pleased with explanations that specify jointly sufficient conditions. They seek parsimony but not necessarily monocausal explanations, for they have gradually come to conclude that there are few causal variables that are individually necessary or sufficient for explaining outcomes.56

I will return to the role of theory in historical explanation, but it is useful to note here that to the extent that historians are explicit in their use of theory in their explanations, they reject the idea that a single theory can provide a total explanation and prefer to draw on many different theories. As Melvyn Leffler argues in explaining how he uses theories from all levels of analysis in his study of the Cold War, “I applied no single theory. . . . It reality is too complex to be captured by a single

54. Criticisms of excessively or inadequately parsimonious explanations can be found within each discipline. Many political scientists have criticized neorealist theory for being too parsimonious and for generating underdetermined outcomes. See Waltz, Theory of International Politics; and Robert O. Keohane, ed., Neorealism and Its Critics (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

55. Compare this treatment with the one in Richard Ned Lebow’s chapter in this volume.

56. An important exception here is the proposition that just democracy is a sufficient condition for peace (defined as the absence of war), which “comes as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations.” See Jack S. Levy, “Domestic Politics and War,” Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Spring 1988), p. 662; and James Lee Ray, Democracy and International Conflict (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993). The absence of variables that are either necessary or sufficient to explain variations in outcomes in a theoretical sense does not imply that there may not be necessary or sufficient conditions for outcomes in particular cases, though strict proponents of covering-law explanations would probably dissent from this view.
theory, different theories may help the historian to make sense of different parts of the phenomenon or event or process under scrutiny. 57

Leffler implies that theory is like a toolbox, a set of instruments from which to draw, with the assumption that a different set of tools will be used in different cases depending on what needs to be explained. This view may be helpful in providing total explanations of individual phenomena. It does not facilitate the formulation or testing of theoretical generalizations, at least in the eyes of the political scientist. 58 This task requires a single, well-specified, and integrated theoretical structure, the derivation of a set of propositions, and their empirical validation through an appropriate research design. The use of multiple theories without integrating them into an overarching theoretical structure increases the likelihood of logical inconsistencies and contradictions among different theoretical propositions, and is an important line of criticism that deductively-oriented theorists make of both historians and inductively-oriented political scientists. 59

It is useful to contrast the "toolbox" conception of theory with the norm that has developed in political science for scholars to analytically distinguish their own theories (or explanations of individual cases) from competing theories or explanations and to explicitly test their theories against the leading alternatives. Many case studies in political science, for example, are organized around competing theories rather than a single narrative. To the extent that historians deal with competing theories in their narratives, this is much less explicit and rarely serves as an organizing device. The political scientist's preference for pitting theory against competing theory rather than integrating elements from different perspectives into a single, more complex theory is consistent with the goal of making theories as parsimonious as possible. One can debate, however, whether this increases our understandings of individual cases.

Political scientists agree with historians that no single theory can provide a complete explanation of a set of events. Unlike historians, however, political scientists have no interest in providing complete explanations. They only want to explain theoretically relevant aspects of the case, as determined by their own disciplinary framework, and to generalize to the broader universe of all comparable cases. 60

This difference between attempting to maximize descriptive accuracy in a particular case and insisting upon a more parsimonious theory to facilitate generalization affects the basic tradeoff between internal validity and external validity—between providing an exact and precise explanation of a particular "case" or set of events or data, and providing a reasonable basis for generalizing beyond the data to other similar instances of the same class of events. Historians give primacy to internal validity, while political scientists are willing to sacrifice some internal validity in order to increase external validity. 61

**PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES**

The different tradeoffs historians and political scientists make between internal and external validity, which derive from their respective idio- graphic and nomothetic aims, helps explain the emphasis each places on primary sources. Historians have traditionally insisted on the central importance of primary sources, while political scientists have been more willing to rely on secondary sources based on the work of historians. One problem that political scientists must confront in their use of secondary sources is that the implicit (or explicit) theoretical questions that guided the historian's study may have been quite different from the questions the political scientist wants to answer, and this may limit the utility of particular secondary sources for the political scientist. This mismatch between theory and data, along with other considerations, leads Deborah Larson to call for political scientists to rely less on histor-

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59. Isaiah Berlin makes a similar argument in "History and Theory," p. 91 when he says that the "crucial difference" between history and the natural sciences is that "the generalizations of history, like those of ordinary thought, are largely unconnected." Waltz has something like this in mind when he describes the evidence that Paul Schroeder complies against neorealist theory as "a melange of irrelevant diplomatic lore," though Schroeder's work has been quite influential in political science, and rightly so. See Paul W. Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist Theory," International Security, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 108-148; and Waltz, "Evaluating Theories," pp. 914.

60. Area specialists constitute an important exception.

61. On different conceptions of validity, see Thomas D. Cook and Donald T. Campbell, Quasi-Experimentation (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1979), chap. 2. This discussion of tradeoffs suggests the potential utility of multmethod approaches to social and political analysis, in which the combination of two or more methods can help to compensate for the limitations of any single method. The combination of case study and statistical or game-theoretic methods (or both) has become more common in political science, and its potential utility is demonstrated by research on the democratic peace.
rians' secondary sources and to do more archival work themselves in the construction and testing of their theories.65

This may be good advice in principle, assuming that the types of data that one's theory calls for are available in the archives. But an important practical problem arises from the kinds of research designs that political scientists construct for the purposes of theoretical generalization, which require a test of the theory either against a large number of cases in a quantitative study, or against a more modest number of cases for the purposes of controlled comparison. Either way, it is simply not possible for a single scholar to engage in a thorough investigation of all available primary sources for each case. This is particularly true given diplomatic historians' recent emphasis on the use of multi-archival sources from different countries. As Theda Skocpol notes with respect to historical sociology, "a dogmatic insistence on redoing primary research for every investigation would be disastrous; it would rule out most comparative-historical research."66

A second problem in the use of secondary sources is the potential for selection biases. Given the large number of secondary sources from which to choose, how does the analyst select which to use or to rely upon most heavily? The analyst may be drawn to precisely those sources that reflect her own theoretical preconceptions, which precludes a fair test of the author's theory against alternative explanations.64 It may be possible, however, for the comparative researcher to minimize these selection biases by securing advice from several leading historians regarding the

62. See Deborah Welch Larson's chapter in this volume. See also Gaddis, "Expanding the Data Base." Political scientists often use some primary sources in doing historical case studies. Quantitative studies based on content analysis also rely heavily on primary sources. One example of the latter is the Stanford 1914 Project, directed by Robert North in the 1960s and 1970s. For a review see Francis W. Hoole and Dina A. Zinnes, eds., Quantitative International Politics: An Appraisal (New York: Frankeser, 1976), part V.


64. Ian S. Lustick, "History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias," American Political Science Review, Vol. 90, No. 3 (September 1996), pp. 609-618; and Paul W. Schroeder, "History and International Relations Theory: Not Use or Abuse, but Fit or Misfit," International Security, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Summer 1997), p. 7. The general problem, as Skocpol ("Emerging Agendas," p. 380) noted, is that "comparative historical sociologists have not so far worked out clear, consensus rules and procedures or the valid use of secondary sources as evidence."

major debates among historians, the best secondary sources, and the analytical biases of particular historians.

It is not clear that the problem of selection bias in the use of secondary sources is any more serious than the potential biases that affect the analyst who works alone in the archives. There is no perfect solution here. Insisting that the political scientist work the archives and in addition read all relevant secondary sources, for example, for enough cases to facilitate the ability to generalize, is impractical. Insisting that researchers using both primary and secondary sources be more sensitive to the potential biases in their sources and in their own minds, and more cognizant of the wide range of interpretations in various secondary sources, while helpful, does not fully eliminate the problem.

PREDICTION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The nomothetic/idiosyncratic distinction also helps explain why political scientists are generally more interested than historians in prediction and possibly also in the utility of scholarship for statecraft.65 Gaddis argues that with respect to prediction (or at least policy implications), "most historians shy from these priorities like vampires confronted with crosses. Many political scientists entertain these challenges."66 Edward Ingram argues that "political scientists are interested in the past only as it affects the present. The past interests historians for itself." He also maintains that "for political scientists, what matters is not what mattered at the time but what contributes to what will matter later on."66 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., has a more ambivalent view of historians'
attitudes toward prediction. He states that historians "privately regard history as its own reward; they stury it for the intellectual and aesthetic fulfillment ... but for no more utilitarian reason. They understand better than outsiders that historical training confers no automatic wisdom in the realm of public affairs."

Yet a page later he argues that generalizations, however defective, are possible, and that they "can strengthen the capacity of statesmen to deal with the future."

It is probably true that political scientists are more interested in prediction than are historians. Some people undoubtedly choose to become political scientists rather than historians precisely because they want to influence policy and because the generalizing aims of political science are more conducive to prediction than the particularizing tendencies of history. This does not necessarily imply, however, that political scientists are always more influenced by contemporary policy concerns than are historians. All historiography involves, to some extent, seeing the past through the eyes of the present. As Benedetto Croce argued, "all history is contemporary history." Similarly, Frederick Jackson Turner wrote that "each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time."

In fact, it is often more difficult to identify the social, political, and cultural biases in theoretical models in contemporary science, which often pride itself on its "objectivity," than in the work of historians, which can be quite evaluative. As Ingram argues, historical narratives tell a story, and a morality play is often part of the story. The influence of these analytic and narrative biases on historical studies is not necessarily imply, however, that these studies are conducted or written in such a way that might generate specific future predictions or policy prescriptions that are well grounded in either theoretical logic or historical evidence.

There is another reason why political scientists are interested in prediction. By using a theory to make predictions and then testing the accuracy of those predictions, one can ensure that a theory is tested against data that played no direct role in the generation of the theory. The aim is to avoid the common error of using the data to generate a theory and then using that same data to test the theory. For this purpose prediction refers not only to forecasts about future events, but also to "predictions" of past events that are unknown to the analyst, or at least that played no direct role in the formulation of his theories. Such predictions are often referred to as postdictions or retrodictions. The importance of postdictions springs from the scientific imperative to derive from a theory as many testable implications as possible, in as many varied temporal and spatial domains as possible, and to subject those predictions to multiple empirical tests.

The methodological mandate to avoid testing a theory with the same data that were used to construct the theory raises a particular problem for historical interpretation. Historical narratives are always written with a knowledge of the outcome of the story, but this raises the danger that the known outcome influences the interpretation of chronologically earlier events. As C.V. Wedgwood wrote, "History is lived forward, but it is written in retrospect. . . . We know the end before we consider the begin-

70. See Edward Ingram's chapter in this volume; Robert Jervis and Paul W. Schroeder also make similar points in their chapters.
71. It is interesting that some of the historical studies with the greatest policy relevance have had greater impact on international relations scholars than on historians. One example might be Paul M. Kennedy, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000 (New York: Random H: . 1987).
72. Prediction. By using a theory to make predictions and then testing the accuracy of those predictions, one can ensure that a theory is tested against data that played no direct role in the generation of the theory. The aim is to avoid the common error of using the data to generate a theory and then using that same data to test the theory. For this purpose prediction refers not only to forecasts about future events, but also to "predictions" of past events that are unknown to the analyst, or at least that played no direct role in the formulation of his theories. Such predictions are often referred to as postdictions or retrodictions. The importance of postdictions springs from the scientific imperative to derive from a theory as many testable implications as possible, in as many varied temporal and spatial domains as possible, and to subject those predictions to multiple empirical tests.
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ning and we can never wholly recapture what it was to know the beginning only.\textsuperscript{76}

**THE FEASIBILITY OF UNIVERSAL LAWS**

Those who test theories over different historical periods necessarily assume that those periods are sufficiently comparable so that trans-temporal theoretical generalizations are meaningful. This raises questions of the continuity of history and the feasibility of universal laws as opposed to contingent generalizations. Political scientists are more willing than historians to assume a continuity or commensurability in history and to seek transhistorically valid theoretical generalizations. Historians are more likely to argue that each historical era has its own culture and "character" and that any historical "laws" are consequently temporally bound. This is expressed in Ranke's dictum that "every epoch is immediate unto God." Terrence Ball argues that it is history's reliance on temporarily bound rather than universal laws that makes a historical explanation historical. From a different perspective, John Gaddis emphasizes the nonreplicable nature of the phenomena that we try to explain.\textsuperscript{77}

We must be careful not to push this distinction too far. The historian, Marc Bloch argued that "the only true history...is universal history," and some schools of historiography do aim for universal generalizations.\textsuperscript{78} One example would be the "New Economic History" in the United States, which utilizes general deductive models of the economy to generate predictions, including counterfactual predictions of what would have occurred under a different set of circumstances.\textsuperscript{79}

Other scientific schools of historiography reject the possibility of universal laws but are willing to make generalizations about phenomena

\textsuperscript{76} C.V. Wedgwood, William the Silent (New York: Norton, 1968), cited in New York Times, March 19, 1969. Political scientists' interpretations of historical cases are also frequently informed by a knowledge of the outcome, though the methodological emphasis on selecting cases based on values of the independent variable, not the outcome, reduces this tendency. See King, Keohane, and Verba, Designing Social Inquiry.


\textsuperscript{79} Key works include Robert William Fogel, Railroads and American Economic Growth (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1964); and Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery (Boston: Little Brown, 1974). This approach has declined from its strong influence in the 1960s.

in more restricted times and places. Many Marxists, for example, assert that social behavior is governed by laws, but these laws are limited to specific points of historical development and are "counteracted" by concrete historical circumstances.\textsuperscript{80} Similarly, the French Annales school, which was quite influential in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, emphasized middle-range generalizations based on an emphasis on both broad structural patterns and the "total" character of each historical setting.

Many political scientists are also much more comfortable with middle-range theory and contingent generalizations than with universal generalizations.\textsuperscript{81} Alexander George, for example, who works within a decision-making framework, has long argued for the value of contingent generalizations and for the role of "typological theory" to generate such generalizations.\textsuperscript{82} Some structural theorists are willing to make broad generalizations about recurrent patterns within historical systems spanning many centuries (the Westphalian system since 1648, for example) but make no claim that such patterns characterize other historical systems. At some point, however, historical systems may be defined so broadly that generalizations about them take on a near-universal character.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{80} As Igers (New Directions, p. 40) argues, "a great deal of Marxist historical research has combined Marxian questions and social critique with rigorous empirical, analytical and test-critical methods" and has "struck a balance between quantitative and qualitative hermeneutical methods.


\textsuperscript{82} The middle-range character of theoretical generalizations is determined not only by their contingent as opposed to universal scope, but also by how broadly the dependent variable is defined. One example might be the analysis of the conditions for international cooperation, as opposed to the narrower question of the conditions for the ratification of agreements.

SCOPe CONDITIONS

I have argued that to the extent that historians attempt to generalize, their generalizations are usually restricted to a well-defined period. The conditional nature of the historian’s generalizations does not differentiate her from the social scientist, because many social science generalizations are conditional rather than universal, so that the social scientist must specify the “scope conditions” under which her generalizations or theory is valid. The difference lies in how the limiting conditions on generalizations are specified. Historians use temporal and spatial criteria whereas social scientists use analytic criteria, as contained in the explicit assumptions underlying their theories. The social science emphasis on analytical scope conditions is expressed in the injunction that in their theoretical propositions scholars should replace the identity of countries, places, and dates with conceptual variables.

While most political scientists conceive of generalizations in terms of relationships between conceptual variables, many historians do not. They are willing to speak of “generalizations” about particular periods, particular countries, or even particular individuals, and treat these generalizations as fully valid and law-like within particular spatial and temporal bounds. Such generalizations are based on knowledge of the period (or country or individual) rather than on universal or contingent covering laws.

This is the argument advanced by N. Rescher and O. Helmer for the role of explanatory laws in historical cases. They argue that statements like “heretics were persecuted in seventeenth-century Spain” are law-like generalizations. An even more restricted form of generalization would be what Gilbert Ryle calls “dispositional explanations” of the behavior of a particular individual, which he claims are law-like in nature. Ryle gives the example of the statement “Disraeli was ambitious.”

While philosophers of history debate whether statements like this are restricted law-like generalizations, political scientists would generally reject such arguments. They generalize not about particular countries or individuals, but rather about kinds of countries or individuals, so that they may generalize about countries like seventeenth-century Spain, defined in terms of certain political, social, or cultural characteristics. They might generalize about the motivations of individuals like Disraeli, and say that individuals with certain personalities, social backgrounds, or belief systems tend to behave in predictable ways. But political scientists prefer not to generalize about particular countries or individuals, and they would not claim that such statements were law-like generalizations. These different meanings that historians and political scientists attach to the notion of generalization helps to explain their strong differences regarding their respective answers to the question of how much historians generalize.

This difference in the specification of scope conditions in history and in political science is revealed in the titles of some of the more influential recent books in peace, war, and security in the two disciplines. The inclusion or noninclusion of spatial and temporal scope conditions in the title provides a strong indicator of the author’s disciplinary affiliation.

There are some historians who seek to construct universal theoretical generalizations and who are exceptions to my distinction between history

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84. This is reflected in some historians’ response to questions about other countries or other periods: “It’s not my period.” Comparative history provides significant exceptions.
90. An interesting exception is James H. Rosenau’s argument that we can have “single-country” theories of foreign policy in “Toward a Single-Country Theory: The USSR as an Adaptive System,” paper presented at the Conference on Domestic Sources of Soviet Foreign and Defense Policies, University of California at Los Angeles, 1965.
and political science. The clearest example is Arnold Toynbee, who aimed to
discuss the laws driving the life-cycles of twenty-one civilizations in the
past in his multivolume *A Study of History.*98 But this is the exception that
proves the rule. Historians and philosophers of science have re-

drowned quite critically to Toynbee and to "speculative history" more
generally.99 In terms of the distinction between history and social science,
one scholar asserts that Toynbee's work "is not, in fact, a history of
anything at all. It is . . . a search or sociological principles of a most
general and universal kind." The question is "whether *A Study of
History* belongs to history or to sociology, but only whether it is good
sociology or bad sociology."100

THE ROLE OF COVERING LAWS

I have argued that some historians explain singular events or episodes in
terms of unique contextual factors and other historians explain those
events in terms of more general theoretical propositions. There is a sub-
stantial consensus among most political scientists (with the important
exception of many constructivists), but not among historians, that only
the latter is a valid form of explanation. That is, as a discipline political
science is far more likely than history to accept Hempel's covering law
(or nomological) model of explanation, in which an explanation of a
crude event requires the subsumption of that event under general laws of
behavior. Given general laws (deterministic or probabilistic) and initial
conditions, a particular event is certain or likely to occur. These general
laws may be implicit in the historian's narrative, but without general laws
explanation is not possible.101 As Jeffrey Isaac argues, "deductive no-
omological explanation is "the dominant view of causality and scientific
explanation in political science."102

In contrast, most historians formally reject the covering law model.103
Many implicitly accept some version of Oakeshott's view that "the rela-
tion between events is always other events."104 This is inherent in the idea
of "genetic" or "sequential" explanation based on a fine-tuned descrip-
tion or process tracing of how one event leads to another.105 But (follow-
ing Hume) how can we be certain that one observed event causes another?
Hempel's response, implicitly accepted by most political scientists, is that
each link in the causal chain must be based on empirically validated
theoretical propositions.106 In the absence of deterministic laws we must
settle for probabilistic laws and hence a causal chain with a series of
probabilistic linkages.

Discovery*; and Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1965). Hempel refers to explanations in which assumptions are not explicit as
"incomplete explanations."


100. For critiques, see William H. Dray, *Laws and Explanation in History* (London:
Oxford University Press, 1957); Alan Ryan, *The Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (New
York: Pantheon, 1970); and Maurice Mandelbaum, "The Problem of Covering Laws," in
Patrick Gardiner, ed., *The Philosophy of History* (London: Oxford University Press,
1974), pp. 51-65. Dray argues that theory-driven explanation (in the form of covering laws)
sets up a kind of conceptual leap in *On Global War* (New York: Basic Books, 1960); and
Randall L. Scheller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tragedy and Hitler's Strategy of World


Roberts, *The Logic of Historical Analysis* (University Park: Penn State University Press,
1966). It is also significant, as Roberts argues (p. 13), that "Historians today do not

cite or quote from *A Study of History.*"

103. Burnstid, "Toynbee and Sociology," pp. 95-96. After reading an earlier version of
this essay, Matthew Medio wrote (private correspondence, October 7, 1999) that in the
early 1960s he asked Toynbee how he would categorize himself. Spengler, the sociolo-
gist Pitirim Sorokin, was the anthropologist A.L. Kroeber, who are all now regarded
as founders of the paradigmatic, postmodern, Toynbee replied, "we are all . . .

104. Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Dilemmas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

105. For Ernest Nagel, *The Structure of Science* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979, pp. 564-

106. Roberts, *Historical Explanation,* p. 4. Historians require both a theoretical explana-
tion and demonstrated empirical regularity. The belief that much positivistic political
science has emphasized the latter at the expense of the former has led some to adopt a
"scientific realism" epistemology because of its emphasis on causal mechanisms. David
Dessler, "Beyond Correlations: Toward a Causal Theory of War," *International Studies*
One important implication of this argument is that it is necessary to go beyond the set of events one wants to explain in order to explain them, because the validation of general laws (whether deterministic or probabilistic) requires the confirmation of observable regularities over a broader empirical domain. As Ray argues, “single events cannot be ‘explained’ in isolation” and that “comparison of an event to be understood and explained with other events is logically impossible to avoid.”

The widespread acceptance of this argument by political scientists and its rejection by many historians is reflected in the tendency of the former but not the latter to abut single case studies in favor of comparative case studies or larger statistical studies. Political scientists focus on the general rather than the particular because they believe that theory construction is both an end in itself and a necessary means to explain particular events by subsuming them under covering laws.

SYNTHETIC JUDGMENT

In his discussion of the essence of historical analysis, Paul Schroeder argues that Louis Mink’s concept of “synoptic judgment” best captures the task of the historian. Mink claimed that historians attempt to “understand an event as unique rather than as typical.” He argued that the “distinctive characteristic of historical understanding consists of comprehending a complex event by ‘seeing things together’ in a total and synoptic judgment which cannot be replaced by any analytic technique.”

Schroeder writes that “a synoptic judgment means a broad interpretation of a development based on examining it from different angles to determine how it came to be, what it means, and what understanding of it best integrates the available evidence.” For Schroeder, the more synoptic judgments are guided by theory, the better. Similarly, W.H. Walsh argues that “different historical events can be regarded as going together to constitute a single process, a whole of which they are all parts and in which they belong together in a special intimate way.” The “first aim of the historian” is to see an event “as part of a process, to locate it in its context.”

This conceptualization neatly captures what a lot of historians do. It is also perfectly consistent with my argument that most historiography aims to explain a series of discrete events rather than construct general propositions about relationships between variables. Mink’s focus is still on events, not classes of events or theoretical categories; the same is true of Walsh. It is also significant that Schroeder illustrates the synoptic judgment concept with his own work on the single case of World War I, and by his use of the metaphor of the physician’s diagnosis—which includes theoretical knowledge and “skill in seeing which interpretation of the evidence works best in a particular case.”

Narrative-Based Explanation and Theory-Based Explanation

It is often said that a key difference between historians and political scientists is that historians tend to construct narrative-based explanations while political scientists (and social scientists more generally) tend to construct theory-based explanations. This argument implies that narrative-based explanations and theory-based explanations are analytically distinct, that historians’ narratives are not theory-based, and that political scientists’ explanations do not involve narratives. Each of these points is problematic, depending on precisely how one defines both “narrative” and “theory.” After elaborating what I mean by narrative, I consider the role of narrative in political science and the role of theory in history.

I follow the historian Lawrence Stone and define narrative as “the organization of material in a chronologically sequential order, and the focusing of the context into a single coherent story, albeit with subplots.” In narrative history, as distinct from theory, Stone argues, “the arrangement is descriptive rather than analytical,” and “its central focus is on man not circumstances. It therefore deals with the particular and specific rather than the collective and statistical. Narrative is a mode of historical writing, but it is a mode which also affects and is affected by...”
the content and the method." Stone goes on to say that a narrative is guided by a "pregnant principle" and includes "a theme and an argument." 108

Stone's conception of narrative is generally useful, but I see no reason to separate narrative history from structural history and to focus narrowly on "man not circumstances." Historical narrative can easily combine both the evolution of international and domestic structures within which human agents act as well as agents' beliefs, goals, motivations, and personalities. Indeed, narrative explanation, just like any explanation, must do so. On theoretical grounds neither an agent-based nor a structure-based explanation is complete without the other, and both should be integrated into our explanations, whether they be theoretical models or historical narratives. We can ignore neither the preferences of actors nor the structural or informational environments in which they act. 109

Paul Schroeder makes an argument similar to Stone's when he suggests that historians, unlike political scientists, "explain historical change primarily or ultimately in terms of human conduct, that is, purposive acts of agency, not behavior." But Schroeder follows with a rather nuanced discussion, and a paragraph later refers to his own interpretation of World War I as "the result of systemic breakdown." Similarly, Schroeder's analysis of the Vienna settlement of 1815 and the Concert of Europe emphasizes both the autonomous beliefs of political leaders and structural factors such as the impact of the "shared hegemony" of Britain, Russia and certain "subhegemones" on the continent. 110 Schroeder's interpretations are powerful precisely because they focus both on purposive acts of agency and the structures within which agents act.

THE ROLE OF THEORY IN HISTORY

The hypothesized dichotomy between narrative and theory implies that historians mainly write narratives and that these narratives are atheoretical. This is misleading, as many narratives are guided by a well-defined theoretical perspective, and several important schools of historiography do not utilize narratives. Although political scientists are generally more explicit about their analytical assumptions than historians are, they are more important historical paradigms that are quite explicit in the assumptions and laws upon which their frameworks and interpretations are based. Some of the best examples can be found in Marxist economic history, the Annales school in France, or the "New Economic History" in the United States. 111 These approaches clearly rely on historical narratives, containing its own explanation and seek to base historical explanations on theories and causal laws from the social sciences and to demonstrate their validity through methods that most social scientists would find acceptable. Annales historians, for example, rely on a historical narrative of a causal hierarchy that consists of a fundamental level of geographic, climatic, biological, and economic factors; a second level of enduring social structures; and a ephemeral level of political events, religion, culture, and intellectual developments. 112 There are numerous other examples of historical studies that are more nomothetic than idiographic. 113

Although these historical paradigms have for the most part focused on social and economic history, one can find a number of studies of diplomatic history that organize their historical data around analytic categories instead of (or perhaps in conjunction with) chronological narratives. Gaddis's analysis of the long peace since World War II focuses on several alternative theoretical explanations. In form it is indistinguishable


111. For a good review of these schools of thought see Ruggies, New Directions. American cliometricians are defined more by their quantitative methodology than by any particular substantive theory of history, though they have been particularly influential in economic history.


from the work of political scientists, and in substance it was the first good theoretical study of that topic in either discipline. James Joll begins his study of the origins of World War I with a brief discussion of alternative interpretations, followed with a narrative overview of events of the July crisis, and then organizes the bulk of the book around theoretical variables. Jeremy Black organizes his study of British foreign policy in the early eighteenth century around chapters on the Crown, the Foreign Ministry, trade, religion, the press, and other theoretical variables, and Michael Hogan and Thomas Patterson organize their volume of essays on U.S. foreign relations around analytic categories that are quite familiar to international relations scholars.114

Some diplomatic historians organize their material chronologically but are quite explicit about the theoretical underpinnings of their studies. A.J.P. Taylor, for example, begins his study of European diplomacy from 1848 to 1918 with an analysis of the changing balance of power over this period. Some historians are conversant with international relations theory and incorporate some of its key concepts into their own frameworks, and some have made important contributions to international relations theory. Prime examples of the latter include Schroeder’s analysis of balancing in neorealist theory and his analysis of alliances as instruments of management and control within an alliance. Other examples include Paul Kennedy’s study of imperial overextension and the rise and fall of great powers, and Arno Mayer’s work on the domestic sources of war.115

The role of theory is also quite explicit and quite influential in postmodernist history, but here theory takes on a different form. History after


116. See Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn.”

117. An interesting anecdote on the influence of “theory” on history is provided by Gordon Schochet: On meeting a good friend who had returned from a summer of research in London, Schochet said, “it must have been very difficult and crowded at the British Library. I hate doing research in London in the summer; what with all those Americans climbing all over one another.” His friend, another intellectual historian, replied: “No, it wasn’t bad at all; there was hardly anyone there. No one’s using books any more. They’re all doing theory.” Gordon Schochet, “Where Have All the Historians Gone?” Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, Austin, Texas, 1996.

118. This is slowly beginning to change. For recent constructivist or postmodern approaches to diplomatic history, see the symposium on “Culture, Gender, and Foreign Policy,” Diplomatic History, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Winter 1994); and Frank Ciocciola, “Uncoupling, Pressure for Penetration: Gender, Pathologies, and Emotion in George Kennan’s Formation of the Cold War,” Journal of American History, Vol. 60, No. 4 (March 1993), pp. 1390-1399.


NARRATIVES IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

A significant percentage of books and even journal articles in political science incorporate historical case studies. These are usually preceded by a section on theory and method, which includes a discussion of the author’s theory or hypotheses, usually one or two alternative theories against which they will be tested, criteria for case selection, the empirical indicators to tap one’s general theoretical concepts, and other elements of the research design. The historical material is sometimes organized around explicitly analytical criteria and sometimes in an approximately chronological manner, though one that is often couched in a theoretically relevant language. Many of these narratives look quite comparable to historians’ narratives, but political scientists usually do comparative studies of two or more cases and explicitly address the question of whether the historical evidence is consistent with the predictions of the theory and perhaps those of alternative theories.

Recent work on qualitative methodology has led to considerable improvements in comparative case studies in international relations. The goal is to increase the relevance of case studies for the construction and validation of theories, to help transform descriptive historical accounts into analytic accounts. Alexander George’s methodology of structured focused comparison, in which each case is structured by a single set of questions and focused on those aspects of each case that the theory defines as relevant, has been particularly important in this regard. George emphasizes the role of process tracing, a within-case method that involves an attempt to explain outcomes by tracing the sequence of events that brings them about. This is quite similar to the form of explanation adopted by most historians and labeled “genetic explanation” (Ernest Nagel and W. B. Gallie), “sequential explanation” (Louis Mink), or “col-ligation” (Clayton Roberts).


In both his earlier work and his more recent work with Andrew Bennett, George emphasizes the potential utility of the “congruence method,” which is more correlational in structure and which plays a more ambiguous role in structured focused comparison.112 The congruence method builds on the comparative method formalized by John Stuart Mill, and parallels the logic underlying historical sociology and comparative history.113 It is often difficult to differentiate between comparative history, historical sociology, and comparative work in political science. Although comparative historians are relatively few in number, they constitute an important exception to my argument that most historians are primarily interested in explaining particular historical episodes or periods.

I should emphasize that process tracing, like many methods, can be utilized with a variety of theoretical orientations. Although some advocates of process tracing in political science seek a sophisticated methodological alternative to the growing influence of rational choice approaches in the discipline, there is no inherent incompatibility between rational choice as a theoretical orientation and process tracing as a methodology. Many historians’ narratives are consistent with a rational choice orienta-

122 Bennett and George, Case Studies and Theory Development.

tion, and one can find historical case studies by historians and political scientists that are self-consciously guided by a rational choice framework.124

The compatibility of a narrative methodology with a rational choice theoretical orientation is developed more systematically by Kiser in response to "the revival of narrative" in historical sociology. He argues that "rational choice narratives" can incorporate human agency, particular events, temporality, and path dependence (and, I might add, important informational considerations) in a way that overcomes some limitations in current applications of narratives in historical sociology.125

A similar development is underway in political science. Some leading rational choice theorists have developed the methodology of "analytic narratives." The approach is analytic in that it involves explicit and formal lines of reasoning based on rational choice and game-theoretic models, but it organizes much of the material in a narrative manner, pays close attention to context, and involves the continuous interplay between theory and data. This approach, like George's structured focused comparison, constitutes a potential point of convergence with the narrative methodology of many historians.126

It is clear, then, that the argument that historians use narrative-based explanations whereas political scientists adopt theory-based explanations is both analytically flawed and a significant distortion of the work done by influential scholars in both disciplines.


cal scientists’ concern with the process of validating those generalizations empirically, with developing methodologies that permit inferences from an observed sample to an analytically defined universe.  

Most graduate training programs in political science require a course (or sequence of courses) on research design and statistics, and in the past decade courses on qualitative methods or qualitative research design have become more common. The fundamental problem for the case study researcher in political science is how to generalize from her data to a broader domain of behavior, how to rule out the causal influences of extraneous variables, and how to select cases in a way that facilitates the empirical test of theoretical propositions. Experimentalists also have difficulty building a theoretical framework for methodology. Just as historians’ theoretical assumptions and propositions are embedded in their historical narratives, their discussions of methodology are embedded in their discussions of concrete subject matter.  

Because they believe that theoretical considerations must inform all aspects of empirical inquiry, political scientists are troubled by the failure of historians to be explicit about their theoretical assumptions and propositions. Political scientists argue that this undercuts the ability of other researchers to validate the historian’s interpretations, causal inferences, and claims of generalizability to other historical periods. Consider the case of Thucydides, who believed that the events of the Peloponnesian War would repeat themselves and who was convinced that he was writing “for all time.” Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War may have been driven by a clear set of theoretical assumptions, but he was not explicit about what they were. Scholastic debate continues, for example, about whether or not Thucydides was a realist and about numerous other aspects of his historical interpretation. Thucydides may have been correct that the patterns of the Peloponnesian War would repeat themselves, that his interpretation of the war between Athens and Sparta could be generalized to other times and other places. Before accepting this, however, most political scientists would insist on an explicit specification of Thucydides’ hypotheses and the construction of a research design that permitted a systematic empirical test of those hypotheses over a wider range of historical systems and theoretical conditions.  

Conclusions  

I have argued that the primary distinction between history and political science—or at least between the most influential scholarship in each discipline—is that historians attempt to understand and explain sequences of events within a given period whereas political scientists attempt to explain relationships among variables. This does not imply that historians are necessarily atheoretical. All historical interpretations are guided by underlying analytic assumptions and causal propositions, implicit or explicit. Some historians are more explicit than others about those assumptions, some take time to organize their research explicitly around theoretical categories, and some give explicit attention to the causal  


mechanisms driving the behavior they observe. A smaller number of historians attempt to generalize beyond their observed data to other times and other places. But very few historians give much attention to the methodologies through which their theoretical generalizations might be empirically validated. Political scientists, on the other hand, are consumed by the question of how to generalize beyond their data to the larger universe from which their data were selected. It is this concern for the empirical validation of theoretical generalizations that in the end best distinguishes political science from history.

This is not to say that international relations theorists have been particularly successful in their task of empirically validating their theoretical generalizations. We have relatively few law-like generalizations in the field, the closest being the proposition that democracies rarely if ever fight each other. But even this proposition is contested, and even its supporters concede that this is an empirical "law" for which a convincing theoretical explanation has yet to be found.134 This seems to support the argument of most historians that the context-dependent nature of international behavior makes it extraordinarily difficult if not impossible to identify transcendentally valid, law-like patterns of international relations. But it is equally true that few historical interpretations of particular events or particular eras are uncontested. Debates about the validity of historical interpretations are as commonplace and animated as debates about the validity of international relations theories.

Implicit in this discussion is the argument that although historians and political scientists generally have different objectives, they can better achieve those objectives if they make a greater effort to learn from each other and build on each other’s accomplishments. Research on international relations can be cumulative across disciplines as well as between disciplines. Greater attention to the analytic assumptions and causal propositions underlying their interpretations would help historians to sharpen the theoretical coherence of those interpretations and eliminate logical contradictions in their arguments. Similarly, greater attention to historical context would help political scientists construct more valid indicators for their theoretical concepts, recognize the spatial and temporal domains over which their generalizations are valid (which would help them better specify the analytical scope conditions for their theories), and facilitate the task of developing contingent generalizations. Just as a complete description of the connections between events is not sufficient for good history in the absence of a specification of underlying causal mechanisms, a rigorous formulation of a logically coherent theoretical structure is insufficient for good theory in the absence of the empirical validation of the testable implications of the theory over a wide range of conditions. As I concluded in my earlier essay on this issue, history is too important to leave to the historians, and theory is too important to leave to the theorists.135


135. Levy, "Too Important to Leave to the Other," p. 33.