

Editors' Response

The *Oxford Handbook of History and International Relations* looks both forwards and backwards. On the one hand, it reviews and reflects upon the long and mutually constructive relationship between historical enquiry and the study of international relations; on the other, it showcases some of the innovative work that is currently being done at the intersection of the two academic disciplines, and suggests new directions for future research. The theoretical richness of contemporary scholarship on IR, combined with the proliferation of new perspectives on History in the last few decades, such as the rise of Global History, makes this an exciting and rapidly changing field of enquiry. Our editorial choices – particularly the organising themes of ‘modernity’ and ‘granularity’, and our selection of specific ‘moments’, ‘locales’, and ‘practices’ – frame this diversity in particular ways.

In that context, we are delighted that all the reviewers engage critically with those choices, especially regarding voices and histories hitherto excluded, as well as the conceptual and epistemological hierarchies we may be complicit in reproducing, despite our attempts to unsettle them. We welcome such engagement because we ourselves are committed to critical reflection on our own presuppositions and organizing schemas. The reviewers do so in different ways, identifying distinct kinds of restrictions that our editorial choices imply and suggesting divergent paths for thinking about the relationship between History and IR.

Alexander Barder generously credits our volume with ‘pushing the boundaries of our sense of what a reengagement with history can do for the discipline of IR’, while at the same time challenging some of the very disciplinary foundations on which that reengagement rests. He also challenges us to confront our neglect of those histories that remain unintelligible to our

ways of framing the international, and asks us to push boundaries even further to reconsider the ontology of 'the event' to emphasize its generative and indeterminate qualities. These challenges bring into focus a substantive concern with fascism, or 'fascistic desire', whose resurgence our volume fails to anticipate in the sense that we do not offer insight into a phenomenon that is now turning out to be a major preoccupation of the 21st century.

Barder's critiques invite us to consider what might have been possible had we ourselves not been tethered to our particular epistemological anchors. He focuses on the omissions and oversights generated by what he sees as our somewhat uncritical absorption of rationalist approaches to understanding. Barder suggests that this implicit commitment to rationality (which we never articulate, let alone defend) may blind us to 'nonsensical' phenomena such as conspiracy theories, which are among others the germinal seeds of antisemitism and fascism in the 19th century. Moreover, attentiveness to the indeterminacy and 'creative disposition' of the intersection between language and 'event' might offer us another granular angle on the interplay of 'history the phenomenon' and its human interpretation. In hewing to what he claims is a rationalist epistemology, we may have neglected to seek out contributions to the volume which would have shed light on phenomena such as global eruptions of fascism, which, as we are now acutely aware, are not confined to 'the past'.

For Jan Eijking, the *Handbook's* principal achievement is to show how for IR 'historical thinking is not simply a matter of methodological preference, but foundational to the discipline as a whole'. Eijking goes on to argue, however, that despite the success of the *Handbook's* chapters, they nonetheless raise important questions for the future of 'Historical IR'. Two of these stand out. His first concern is that while the *Handbook's* authors introduce a wealth of different methods, applied to diverse practices, locales, and moments, this raises an

unresolved question about the purpose(s) of Historical IR. Is it about recovering the forgotten or silenced in narratives of IR, or about denaturalizing existing concepts, or about testing or developing new theories? Our response is to resist any attempt to ascribe particular purposes to Historical IR. To begin with, in posing the question, Eijking seems to assume that the *Handbook* is seeking to advance a sub-disciplinary project called ‘Historical IR’, to which one could ascribe particular purposes. Yet as Spanu and Reus-Smit explain in their concluding chapter, this is something we explicitly eschew. Indeed, as Eijking observes correctly, our goal is far more ambitious: to show that historical thinking is foundational to IR. If this is true, then by definition the purposes of such thinking will be as diverse as the hugely varied work that congregates under IR’s ever-changing umbrella.

While this is our position, Eijking is right that many, if not all, of the chapters have revisionist agendas, and this is true of the volume as a whole. We, as editors, sought to disrupt established ways of thinking about history and international relations (and about History and IR), and our central themes (granularity and modernity), organizing sections (practices, locales, and moments), and choice of chapters were designed to encourage our authors—historians and IR scholars—to think afresh about this relationship. But while Eijking commends this agenda (and its results), he worries that revisionism can itself be conservative, reproducing the very thing it seeks to dislodge or decentre. By way of example, he points out that eight of our thirteen chapters on historical moments are critical rethinks of canonical European-centred events: the Peace of Westphalia, the Congress of Vienna, the First World War, etc. No matter how revisionist these chapters are, he argues, such ‘critique can risk reinforcing the supposed centrality of its object’. It is not clear, though, what the alternative is. If we accept that these were significant moments in the history of international relations, then surely it is better to address them critically than to leave the established narratives about

them stand unchallenged. Beyond this, while mindful that we could choose only a limited number of moments, our goal was twofold: to show readers that there were canonical European-centred events they thought they knew, but did not; and that there were other moments in global history they likely did not know, but should.

Victoria Hui congratulates the *Handbook* on its efforts to de-centre the West and to challenge essentialist views of what its particular form of ‘modernity’ represents as a vision of world order. The key to this, she argues, is the adoption of more relational perspectives that emphasise the fluid and contested nature of what are often taken to be settled principles or forms of international order in traditional narratives. However, Hui’s main criticism is that this perspective is not extended consistently enough, or with the same force, towards the interrogation of non-Western ideas and practices of world ordering. She highlights David Kang’s chapter on ‘Asia’ in the History of International Relations’ for what she depicts as a series of missed opportunities to ‘bring in relationalism’. One question here is about the extent to which Hui’s disagreement with Kang’s chapter represents differences in historical interpretation, rather than historical method as such. One of Kang’s central arguments, which he explicitly presents as an alternative to previous scholarship by Hui and others on the region, is to use the *Handbook*’s theme of ‘granularity’ as an encouragement to analyse patterns of conflict in the region at a local level in order to contest both a narrative that flattens relations into a peaceful form of Sinocentric hegemony, or one that identifies them with forms of war-making and state-making that look similar to one of the major interpretations of European modernity (see especially pp. 505-10). It is not that this eschews relationalism for narrative, but rather that it offers evidence for a different pattern of relationships than that which form the basis of Hui’s interpretation of international relations in this context.

Beyond specific questions about the historical dynamics of Asian international order (and with the Handbook's section on spatial, temporal, and cultural 'locales' explicitly intended to challenge the essentialism of such designations) this raises a broader methodological question.

Hui's critique seems to rely upon a distinction between two modes of historical reflection in IR -- narrative and relationalism -- treating the former as intrinsically tied to essentialism, and the latter as a kind of key that opens all doors through the right kind of historical reflection on IR. It certainly was one of our purposes to question conventional narratives that are too often taken for granted and effectively prevent deeper historical enquiry in IR scholarship. But it was not our purpose to insist upon a single methodological perspective that all research in the future can adopt. We deliberately made 'granularity' one of our themes not to imply a unique method, but as presenting us with a 'problematique' that arises from the necessary and inescapable tension between the close-up and the far-away, the specific moment and the *longue durée*.

Like the other reviewers, Hendrik Spruyt also looks at the epistemological and methodological choices that frame the collective perspective of the *Handbook*, but offers a very different view of the uses and limitations of historical narrative from Hui. Spruyt senses a strong affinity between historical work in IR and the 'Cambridge School' of contextualist intellectual history, associated most prominently with Quentin Skinner. In that respect, he proposes that our focus on 'moments' can be 'read as practices...to see how an event might suggest multiple interpretations and morph in subsequent phases'. Although he is clearly sympathetic to this broad perspective, Spruyt warns once again that this risks leaving out certain other points of view that have contributed to the development of historical scholarship

within IR, but this time from a more positivist perspective. He highlights the importance of comparative historical institutionalism, which has had a profound influence on a wide range of mainstream developments in IR theory, as something that could broaden our understanding of the value of historical enquiry in IR beyond self-consciously critical or 'post-positivist' epistemologies.

Spruyt's other main concern points in a rather different direction as he warns that the linguistic and textual focus of contextualist histories risks neglecting the experiences of non-literate peoples, or of those whose ways of expressing their own understanding of the meaning of their social and cultural worlds has not survived for the perusal of the historian. More generally, drawing on a brilliant essay by Edward Muir, Spruyt poses the fundamental question of how we can have conversations with the dead, particularly those who cannot speak to us directly through their written legacy, and how we can immerse ourselves in their worlds to achieve a deep interpretive connection with people of past times. This problem, Spruyt notes, is if anything posed in an even more challenging way for the historical study of international relations, where our concern is not merely with the dead but with 'the higher level of aggregation of entire polities and civilisations', where 'the absence of written records magnifies such concerns'. He offers a powerful warning not only of the Western biases implicit in the list of contributors to the volume (the overwhelming majority of whom are based in the US, Britain, Canada and Australia), but also that our fixation with the written word overlooks other forms of evidence -- archaeological evidence, for example -- that signal civilizational creativity and encounters utterly neglected in language-bound narratives.

As we said at the beginning of this short response, we welcome these critical engagements with the editorial choices that structured the *Handbook*. We do not regard those choices as

laying down some kind of final or definitive statement about what the study of History and IR should look like in the future, but as presenting opportunities for precisely this kind of scholarly dialogue. Indeed, we believe that one of the strengths of historical reflection in the study of international relations is its openness to diverse and often unsettling enquiry, rather than mapping a single pathway down which all must travel. We encourage readers of the *Handbook* to consider this forum as an invitation to participate in that ongoing conversation.