International Relations and the
‘Problem of History’

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The recent emergence of the discourse of the ‘historical turn’ in International Relations (IR) suggests that the discipline shows greater sensitivity to history. However, despite the ubiquity of more historically informed research, mainstream IR has failed to take account of the ‘problem of history’ as highlighted by on-going debates between traditional historians and critical historiographers. According to Jacques Derrida the ‘problem of history’ is not problematic in the conventional sense: rather it is precisely because we can never arrive at a closed historical interpretation that there is historicity in the first place. Therefore, with its continued refusal of the ‘problem of history’, the extent to which IR has turned historical must be questioned. This article draws on Derrida’s work in order to argue for an alternative approach to the way we look at the past: one that embraces rather than side-steps the radical indeterminacy of historical meaning in order to bring historicity into analyses of world politics.

According to the familiar narrative of the trajectory of post-1945 International Relations (IR), in which the so-called ‘behaviouralist revolution’ of the 1950s and 1960s features prominently, structure and space gradually became privileged over time and context in analyses of

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1. Throughout the article I follow the convention of using capital letters to distinguish between International Relations (IR) and History as academic disciplines on the one hand, and international relations and history as subject matter on the other.

world politics.³ This development, exemplified by iconic neorealist texts,⁴ focused on the supposedly timeless regularities of the state and states system instead of the contingencies of life. Given the enduring hegemony of this paradigmatic view, as Stephen Hobden and John Hobson have pointed out, history has long been considered exogenous if not superfluous to IR: at best a quarry to be mined in support of theories of the present.⁵ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita sums up this characterisation when he writes: ‘for the social scientist the events of history are a laboratory. . . to test their theoretical propositions about causation’.⁶ Over twenty years ago Christopher Thorne suggested that Clio, the muse of history, was IR’s ‘call-girl’.⁷ Today, however, as well as an aversion to such potentially sexist remarks there seems to be an emerging consensus that history is taken far more seriously within the discipline.

Over the past two or three decades there has been a push in IR to historicise the theories, logics, and concepts with which international relations are studied. This push is often characterised as yet another ‘turn’ within what has become a highly contorted field. For example, Benno Teschke refers to the ‘historical turn’;⁸ Duncan Bell to the ‘historiographical turn’;⁹ whilst Stephen Hobden, mindful of earlier diplomatic histories, prefers ‘historical return’¹⁰. On the basis of these characterisations, it might seem history has been well and truly brought back in. And on the one hand there is much evidence to support Bell’s assertion that history now occupies a ‘centre-stage’ role in IR¹¹. On the other hand, however, it is not necessarily the case that a greater output of historically informed research constitutes a turn towards history per se.

Indeed, as pedantic as it might sound, the veracity of Bell’s

⁴ The most obvious example being Kenneth Waltz, Theory of International Politics (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1979).
⁵ Hobden and Hobson, Historical Sociology, 4-5.
¹⁰ Hobden, ‘Back to the Future?’, 56.
¹¹ Bell, ‘Historiographical Turn?’, 123.
assertion depends entirely on what is meant by ‘history’ in the first place. Interestingly, despite the ubiquity of appeals to the historical, there is a sense in which this key theme – What do we mean when we refer to history in IR? – remains somewhat starved of critical reflection. In many ways this is perhaps surprising; especially given that, at the very moment IR has supposedly turned to history, historians seem to have turned on themselves when it comes to the ‘What is history?’ question.

The debate waged over the past twenty or so years between so-called ‘traditionalist historians’ (such as Arthur Marwick, Lawrence Stone, Richard J. Evans) and ‘critical historiographers’ (such as Alun Munslow, Keith Jenkins, and Hayden White), though not unproblematic, as we shall go on to see, usefully highlights the contestability of the concept of history. Yet, even after the various turns to history to which Teschke, Hobden, and Bell refer, mainstream IR has not fully taken account of this debate or the thorny issues it raises.

This is to the detriment of the discipline. It leaves the ‘problem of history’, in other words the impossibility of getting historical interpretation one hundred percent right, glossed over if not ignored entirely. Instead of projecting the radical uncertainty of historical meaning into its object of study the preference in IR is to impose a form of interpretive closure on the historical record: ‘a [form of] representation that arrests ambiguity and controls the proliferation of meaning by imposing a standard and a standpoint of interpretation that is taken to be fixed and independent of the time it represents’.

The imposition of such a standard and standpoint of interpretation implies the necessity (and possibility) of a stance outside of both history...
and politics from which it is possible to arrive at a singular understanding of what is often referred to as historicity: ‘dispersal, difference, and alterity across time and space’.16 Such a stance is of course fantastical. More importantly still, however, an imposition of this kind has particularly important implications for IR since any attempt to stifle the ‘equivocity of history’17 constitutes a violent dehistoricisation, which, in turn, may have significant political ramifications.

The over-arching aim of this article is to emphasise the need to bring not just history but specifically the ‘problem of history’ into our study of international relations. It proceeds along primarily conceptual rather than empirical lines by interrogating what is at stake in allowing the history in the ‘historical turn’ to continue to go unnoticed as an unproblematic given.

There are three main sections to the argument. The first offers a tour d’horizon of the key issues raised by the debate between traditionalist historians and critical historiographers. What emerges from this discussion is certainly a strong sense of the ‘problem of history’ largely elided by mainstream IR. However, taking up Gabrielle Spiegel’s point,18 the section notes that this historiographical debate is itself hampered by a degree of intellectual parochialism. Each ‘side’ has tended to rely upon somewhat caricatured understandings of the other and, consequently, an unhelpful impasse has been reached: traditional historians stand accused of theoretical naivety whilst critical historiographers are cast aside as ahistorical or even anti-historical. An appreciation of the debate can thus only be considered a first step in bringing the ‘problem of history’ into IR.

Seeking to move beyond the parameters of this debate the second section then draws on the work of Jacques Derrida in order to show how the ‘problem of history’ is perhaps best understood not as a problem in the traditional sense; that is, it is not a problem that can be resolved. Rather, the problem of history must be considered as a necessary condition for any attempt to deal with context and time.

The third section relates this argument back to IR more explicitly. On the basis of the Derridean reconfiguration of history I suggest that IR’s alleged historical turn represents a movement away from the very

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Historicity it purports to embrace. From there, I urge an alternative approach to the historicisation of analyses of world politics: one which does not refuse the problem of history but one that allows the problem of history to remain precisely as a problem to be continually engaged.

(Re-)Visiting the Historiographical Debate

The venerable tradition of thought that has dealt with the question ‘What is history?’ looms large over this article. However, it is not my intention to offer an exegesis of the main strands of the philosophy of history. Rather, I want to limit the present discussion to the recent debate between traditionalist historians and critical historiographers, and the key aspects of the ‘problem of history’ their exchange highlights. This debate has raged within History journals without spilling over into the IR literature to any significant extent.

The first sub-section sets out the main arguments of critical historiographers such as Alun Munslow, Keith Jenkins, and Hayden White. The second then surveys the traditionalist backlash epitomised by the work of Lawrence Stone, Arthur Marwick, and Richard J. Evans. And the third argues that, whilst the debate opens up new ground for our consideration of the past in IR, it nevertheless frames the problem somewhat problematically.

Critical Interventions

Mainstream historical studies, according to Alun Munslow, have traditionally rested upon six core principles: firstly, the past is considered ‘real’ and ‘truth’ relates to reality through referentiality and inference; secondly, so-called ‘facts’ derived from evidence are a priori distinct from interpretation; thirdly, ‘fact’ and ‘value’ are clearly separable; fourthly, ‘history’ and ‘fiction’ can and must be differentiated; fifthly, the knower is removed from what is known; and, sixthly, ‘truth’ is not perspectival.19 These dichotomies – between ‘truth’ and ‘falsehood’, ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’, ‘observer’ and ‘observed’ – are deemed highly problematic by Munslow and other critical historiographers. Such distinctions, they argue, are often much more difficult to maintain than advocates of traditional historical methodology are usually willing to admit.20

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Keith Jenkins raises this point in relation to the common separation between primary and secondary sources:

[If you refer to . . . sources as primary and if you sometimes replace primary by original (original and thus underlying/fundamental source), this suggests that if you go to the originals, then because originals seem genuine (as opposed to secondary/second-hand traces), genuine (true/deep) knowledge can be gained. This prioritises the original source, fetishises documents, and distorts the whole working process of making history.]

Jenkins does not wish to collapse the distinction between primary and secondary sources. On the contrary, he acknowledges that, as ‘traces of the past’, primary sources are fundamentally ‘different’ from secondary sources. Yet, at the same time, Jenkins’s concern is that the importance of this difference should not be exaggerated as it typically is. Such exaggeration reifies a particular view of history as ‘the search for truth’, when, for Jenkins, ‘we can never really know the past; . . . there are no centres; . . . there are no ‘deeper’ sources (no subtext) to draw upon to get things right: all is on the surface’. The crux of the critical historiographers’ intervention, then, as suggested within the lengthy quotation of Jenkins, is that history is ‘made’ by historians rather than discovered through evidence-based methodology. On this basis, therefore, Jenkins insists that, at its most basic level, the concept, discipline, and practice of history needs fundamental ‘rethinking’ and ‘refiguring’. 

*Prima facie* the rise of revisionist historiography suggests that historians working against very different empirical contexts already appreciate nuance, debate, and therefore the underlying ambiguities of their subject matter. Thus, for example, traditionalist accounts of the English Reformation have been superseded by more sophisticated understandings – incorporating rival interpretations and contradictory imperatives – of the English Reformation. However, Jenkins argues

22. Ibid., 57.
24. Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, 57, my emphasis.
25. Ibid., 58.
defiantly that we are not all ‘post-modernists’ now.30 ‘No matter how many “differing interpretations” they may admit to’, he claims, ‘most mainstream historians still continue to strive for “real historical knowledge”, for objectivity, for the evidentially-based synoptic account and for truth-at-the-end-of-enquiry; in other words what are effectively interpretive closures’.

On Jenkins’s view interpretive closures are hugely problematic. This point deserves closer attention. It is important to note that, from his perspective, every account of the past is mediated by language. Furthermore, language is said to be indeterminably unstable, its reference to a concrete object cannot be fixed. Consequently, ‘every discourse, including history, built as they are on and with language, must be... perpetually open too’.32 Movements towards closure, it could be argued, are somewhat inexorable: this is how the past becomes imbued with meaning. Yet, Jenkins’s point is that since ‘the past contains nothing of intrinsic value, nothing we have to be loyal to... no truths we have to respect’,33 these closures are ideologically laden: ‘history is never for itself; it is always for someone’.35 This, of course, is reminiscent of Robert Cox’s axiom: ‘theory is always for someone and for some purpose’.36 The historian’s task, therefore, is not to search for the truth, so to speak, but to expose and then analyse the way in which some knowledge comes to be accepted as true over other knowledge.37 In this regard Jenkins stresses ‘a relativist perspective need not lead to despair but to the beginning of a general recognition of how things seem to operate’.38

The preoccupation of many critical historiographers, in particular Hayden White, has been to demonstrate precisely how narrative (re)-presentations of the past operate and are embedded in and reinforce particular matrices of power, knowledge, ethics and politics. According

31. Ibid., 3.
32. Ibid., 19.
33. Ibid., 29.
34. Though, as Foucault points out, the concept of ‘ideology’ is not unproblematic, ‘because it always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth’. Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977, trans. and ed. Colin Gordon (Padstow: The Harvester Press Ltd, 1980), 118.
to White, classical historiography, largely an invention of Herodotus, urged the historian to uncover facts and then rearrange them as narratives.\textsuperscript{39} The legacy of this school of thought has endured. Croce argued that ‘where there is no narrative there is no history’. Similarly, for Kant, ‘historical narratives without analysis are empty while historical analyses without narrative are blind’. Therefore, according to the established doxa, ‘events must be . . . narrated. . . that is to say “revealed” as possessing a structure, an order of meaning, that they do not possess as mere sequence’.\textsuperscript{40} In the view of the traditionalist, anything falling short of this golden mean is deemed something other than proper history. Hence the modern view of the annalist (who simply lists events chronologically) and the chronicler (who does not offer conclusions but typically stories that merely terminate) is highly critical if not disdainful.

White, however, questions this modern historiographical convention, which leaves the concept of the narrative unproblematised as some sort of natural medium:

Narrative is not merely a neutral discursive form that may or may not be used to represent real events in their aspect as developmental processes but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications.\textsuperscript{41}

On this alternative view narrative is not some sort of empty form of discourse that may be filled up with different types of content: its form has a content of its own. This content provides a centre, in relation to which otherwise disparate phenomena may be mutually emplaced and understood. Narrative offers a plot. It draws arbitrary borders in order to help us forget what is, knowingly or unknowingly, left out. Gaps are filled. The narrative itself cultivates ‘continuity, coherency, and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time’.\textsuperscript{42} Importantly, the closure that we crave when we turn to the narrative form is exactly that which is lacking in the way events present themselves to us in ‘real’ life. We try to make sense of the nonsensical: of ‘9/11’; of a lottery win; of someone telling us that they love us but cannot be with us. When we realise we are not able to make sense of these happenings we

\textsuperscript{39} Hayden White, \textit{The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation} (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), x.  
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 5.  
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., ix.  
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 11.
create narratives. And although we may be aware of the infinite number of narratives we are able to construct, this infinity somehow still feels less daunting than the alternative: ‘in shaping the formless ooze into ‘recorded history’ we are simply seeking an antidote to the ‘primitive terror’ we feel in the face of the real meaninglessness of the flux’.43

Narrative is not problematic per se. However, it is one of many concepts relating to the way we think about the past that often go uninterrogated, especially in discourses of IR. The force of the critical historiographers’ interventions, though far from homogenous or indeed unproblematic (in the conventional sense), prompts us to remember that history occupies far more contestable, troublesome, and value-laden terrain than most IR literature invoking the realm of the historical would suggest.

The Traditionalist Backlash

Many traditionalist historiographers, however, have sought to resist the critical historiographers’ battle cry.44 Among the most notable is Arthur Marwick, who, in a famous exchange with Hayden White, argued that ‘ideas about language and the “subject” make for exciting novels, but they are a menace to serious historical study’.45 The central accusation is that the work of Munslow, Jenkins and White – inspired by Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and other ‘Left Bank intellectuals’46 – is fundamentally ahistorical if not anti-historical.47 On this traditionalist view, to impose theory and/or interpretation on ‘the evidence’ is to read erroneously the past through presentist lenses.48 Hence, for example, Stone complains ‘texts . . . become a mere hall of mirrors reflecting nothing but each other’.49

46. Though, for Marwick, ‘at least Derrida had a charming playfulness about him’, ibid., 17.
Discourse analysis and other allegedly obfuscatory concepts are damned because, according to Marwick, they deny that past events actually happened. Such extreme textualism leads to hyper-relativism, which, it is claimed, leads to utter despair and total irresponsibility. Supposedly, following Richard J. Evans, one only has to look to the Holocaust: ‘Auschwitz was not a discourse. It trivialises mass murder to see it as a text. The gas chambers were not a piece of rhetoric. Auschwitz was indeed inherently a tragedy and cannot be seen as either a comedy or a farce’.

This argument, as Patrick Finney points out, is something of a ‘trump card’, it closes off the possibility of serious debate by accusing ‘critical historiography’ of serving fascist ends. Instead, it encourages all-guns-blazing responses like that of Keith Jenkins, whose polemics invite the mainstream criticism that critical historiographers cannot be taken seriously. As Finney quips, ‘it is easy to see why many historians regard Jenkins as the Darth Vader of postmodernism’s evil empire’. At this juncture the debate breaks down.

The Limits of the Debate

The debate between Munslow, Jenkins, and White on the one hand, and Marwick, Stone and Evans on the other leaves the reader feeling somewhat frustrated. Whilst, as I have suggested, their exchanges usefully highlight aspects of the ‘problem of history’ so often glossed over, ignored, or necessarily forgotten in IR, in many ways the frame of this debate obscures the problem. Ultimately, the two sides talk past each other as both rely on caricatured notions of the other’s position in order to maintain their own. Thus, traditionalists often make outlandish claims about the historical poverty of critical historiography, in order to defend themselves against the charge they are theoretically naïve. Equally, the likes of Keith Jenkins then retort with deliberately provocative counter-claims, which tend to tarnish the overall impact of many of the insights or potential insights of more critical scholarship.

In the next section I want to move away from this debate by examining the ‘problem of history’ more specifically in light of the work of Jacques Derrida. A Derridean approach is neither ahistorical or anti-historical. Rather, as I hope to demonstrate, it attempts to reconfigure the way we think about history away from the past as such towards the

52. Patrick Finney, ‘Beyond the Postmodern Moment?’ (unpublished article under review), 25.
53. This point is made by Spiegel in ‘History and Post-Modernism’.
future: towards a future-oriented history, what I call a ‘history to come’, in order to allow for historicity or the very history-ness of history.

Towards a Future-Oriented History

Derrida’s infamous remark ‘Il n’ y a pas de hors-text’ (‘there is nothing outside the text’ or ‘there is no outside-text’) is often seized upon by detractors of deconstruction to claim that deconstruction leads us into some sort of bizarre purely textual realm within which anything goes. It is usually on this basis, as we have already seen, that many writers balk at Derridean thought as a whole. However, Derrida’s arguments do not reduce everything to a book. Rather, the concept of the generalised or limitless text stresses that nothing can be brought into being or comprehended except through discursive practices. This is true of historical events as much as anything else. To stress the importance of language does not somehow deny, as Evans’s argument about the holocaust suggests, the trauma of the direst situations. On the contrary, it allows for an appreciation of the implications of any attempt to (re)present these situations; which, as I will show, assists rather than impedes our understanding of what is at stake in any given historical context.

The House that Jacques Built

According to Derrida, the history of the structure of Western thought since Plato is effectively a history of binary oppositions, for example ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’, ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘man’ and ‘woman’ and so on. However, he argues that these conceptual couplets are not true opposites since one of the two is always privileged over the other. ‘Logocentrism’ refers to the privileging of terms in this way. The superior term assumes a degree of naturalness and is referred to as the centre, origin, or source. Consequently, Western thought, built upon and reflected by such structures, is not neutral. Thus, a kind of deconstructive strategy, Derrida suggests, ‘is to avoid both simply neutralising the binary

oppositions of metaphysics and simply residing within the closed field of these oppositions, thereby confirming it’. 58

Derrida is notoriously hesitant to define deconstruction. 59 Yet he insists that it must involve a double gesture. On the one hand, having recognised that ‘in a philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy’, it is necessary to ‘overturn [that] hierarchy’ at a given moment. 60 This move identifies a conflictual and subordinating structure of the opposition. But, on the other hand, to remain in this phase is to remain within the confines of the former system. Therefore, Derrida insists upon another, simultaneous, move: ‘We must also mark the interval between inversion, which brings low what was high, and the irruptive emergence of a new “concept”, a concept that can no longer be, and could never be, included in the previous regime’. 61

Derrida refers to this interval as the ‘undecidable’; that which can no longer be contained within the binary opposition, ‘but which, however, inhabit[s] [it] without ever constituting a third term’. 62 In Positions the ‘undecidable’ is described by way of analogy: it is like the pharmakon (neither a remedy nor a poison), the supplement (neither a plus nor a minus) and the hymen (neither the inside nor the outside) among others. 63 The resisting and disorganising quality of undecidability denies the possibility that any term within an alleged binary opposition can be pure. Deconstruction professes to unpack binary logic in order to demonstrate that the terms within such a supposed opposition are not mutually exclusive, but mutually interdependent; mutually contaminated.

The Limits of Metaphysical Thought: Language, Meaning and ‘Differance’

Binary oppositions, the bedrock of Western metaphysics according to Derrida, presuppose a fixed notion of difference. Thus, ‘heaven’ can be said to rely upon ‘hell’ in order to be identified as such. However, from the Derridean perspective, language is not as stable as this structure implies: meaning is always already on the move, constantly referring,

60. Derrida, Positions, 41.
61. Ibid., 42.
62. Ibid., 43.
63. Ibid.
differentiating and deferring. As such there is no fixed point according to which concrete conceptual definitions can be made. Derrida captures this restless and relentless play with the neologism *differance*.

The difference between *differance* and *difference* is not audible in French: whenever we say *differance* it is unclear or ‘undecidable’ whether or not we are referring to *differance* or merely saying the French word for ‘difference’.

Yet, Derrida’s point is that this difference is not one between static, coherent, self-present elements. In other words the difference is not produced between ‘this’ (e.g., ‘e’) and ‘that’ (e.g., ‘a’). Rather, it is only because of *differance* in the first place that there is a difference between ‘this’ and ‘that’: it is only because there is no-thing outside of the field of spatio-temporal differences in which every-thing acquires a meaning that we can speak of differences between ‘this’ and ‘that’.

*Differance*, then, refers to the ‘systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other’. It ‘is’ ‘literally neither a word nor a concept’. *Differance* does not stand for *this* or *that* but rather this *and* that. Its meaning is constantly deferred (the French word *differer* translates as ‘to defer’ as well as ‘to differ’) and, as a result, it is never within grasp. As soon as moves are made to identify the ‘meaning’ of *differance* we fall back into the logocentric trap: ‘[Differance] cannot be defined within a system of logic . . . that is within the logocentric system of philosophy’.

One might well think: so what? But, as Niall Lucy quips, in light of *differance* ‘something like the entire history of metaphysics is put at risk’.

66. This point, of course, also calls into question the veracity of the metaphysical tendency to privilege ‘speech’ over ‘writing’ as if it were somehow more direct, unmediated, pure or self-present.
71. Ibid., 111.
Metaphysics

David Roberts is more precise. On his view Derrida reveals how the Western philosophical tradition has effectively hidden from its own historicity: *difference* spotlights the way in which dominant metaphysical thought is wound around contingency and circumstance despite its resolve to believe itself somehow pure or suprahistorical.\(^{73}\) Traditionally it has been assumed that there is a certain way things are and that language merely reflects this state of affairs. However, as Roberts highlights, Derridean philosophy shows language not to be a synchronic system but a diachronic chain of disruptions and deferrals:

Meaning is an endless web, each part of which depends on and refers to others, so that we never get a full, final grasp of what is being referred to. Meaning is always deferred; there is always further difference. When we seek the level of settled meaning or certain interpretation, we find no stopping place but only 'traces' or earlier traces, as sequences, linkages, referring us back, back, endlessly back.\(^{74}\)

On this basis the aim becomes to show how something is what it is rather than why it is what it is.\(^{75}\) Our attention is diverted away from the search for ultimate causes towards an analysis of different representations in any given context.

Differance and Historical ‘Truth’ in Post-Metaphysical Thought

So what are the implications of *differance* for the way we think about history? Despite his reliance on a certain Nietzschean playfulness it must be emphasised that Derrida does not abandon the idea of reference altogether: ‘there is no language that is not referential in a certain way’.\(^{76}\) In other words, and contrary to the primary charge of his most vociferous detractors, Derrida is not an ‘out-and-out textualist’.\(^{77}\) For example, a Derridean approach does not fully collapse the distinction between historical narrative and fictional narrative: to do so would be ‘silly’.\(^{78}\) As Roberts points out, this is symptomatic of the way in which Derrida parts company with Nietzsche: the former does not completely abandon the notion of truth whereas for the latter there are only lies or

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74. Ibid., 196.
77. Ibid., 21.
78. Ibid., 27.
In an interview not long before he died, Derrida stated categorically:

I am attached to truth, but I simply recall that for the truth to be true and for the meaning to be meaningful the possibility of a misunderstanding or lie or something else must remain, structurally, always open. That’s the condition for truth to be the truth and for sincerity to be sincere.  

This may come as a shock to some critics of deconstruction who have equated it with an ‘anything goes’ approach. Here, of course, Derrida is not advocating a return to an Eltonian view of history as the search for the truth. Rather, as this article will go on to demonstrate, deconstruction calls for an approach to history that is itself open to history: a historical perspective that, from the outset, takes on board the undecidable infinity of possible truths as its object of analysis. If there is nothing beyond the system of differences that constitutes meaning – in other words if there is nothing beyond differance – then history or historical truths can be seen as complex patterns of forward and recursive loops. Therefore, differance is not somehow antithetical to history. On the contrary, the movement of differance, as argued by Caroline Williams, conditions ‘the very possibility and function of every sign and meaning, every subject and every movement of history’. To paraphrase the title of Roberts’s book, there has never been anything but differance: without differance there would be no history; differance provides the condition of the possibility of history.

The ‘Problem of History’ as Differance

Temporal delay, as Hugh Rayment-Pickard points out, is at the heart of a Derridean understanding of the ‘problem of history’ in terms of differance: ‘meaning is always deferred; the self-erasing traces of history always lose and gain something in transmission’. Another Derridean

80. Payne and Schad, life.after.theory, 44.
analogy is the sending and receiving of a postcard. The lag between sending and receiving distorts – or makes ambiguous – intended meaning. No matter how many times the receiver reads the postcard he or she can never be one hundred percent certain that they have grasped ‘the meaning’ of the text. This is because, on Derrida’s view, there is no singular meaning to grasp: there are always polyphonic, and sometimes contradictory, voices to be heard. Communication, then, is always open or, in other words, liable to confuse. Derrida argues that it is precisely this radical undecidability of meaning that dominant Western metaphysical conceptions of history cannot cope with:

What we must be wary of, I repeat, is the metaphysical concept of history. This is the concept of history as the history of meaning . . . : the history of meaning developing itself, producing itself, fulfilling itself. And doing so linearly . . . in a straight or circular line . . . . We must first overturn the traditional concept of history, but at the same time mark the interval, take care that by virtue of the overturning, and by the simple fact of conceptualisation, that the interval not be reappropriated.85

On this basis a Derridean perspective does not call for the ‘end of history’ but, rather, a reorientation of our approach to history that resists the logocentric traps of metaphysics. We are to proceed, according to Rayment-Pickard, as if historical truth were available whilst at the same time reckoning with its infinite undecidability: ‘Being open in faith to the truth of a text requires being-open to meanings other than the “rational” ones. Indeed, to close down the idea of truth merely to what is rational . . . is an act of infidelity to other possibilities of meaning’. The implication of understanding history as differance is that we can never fully master history. In this context Derrida cites Jan Patoc˘ka’s aphorism: ‘the problem of history cannot be resolved; it must remain a problem’.87 This problematisation of history as a problem is not, however, ‘problematic’ in the conventional sense. Rather, it is precisely because there is a ‘problem’ concerning historical meaning – i.e., that we can never arrive at a closed interpretation – that there is such a thing as historicity or history-ness in the first place.

Attempts to close off this radical indeterminacy of historical meaning – consistent with dominant metaphysical approaches to history according to Derrida – totalise this infinite openness. Deconstruction

84. Ibid., 18.
faces up to the history-ness of history, whereas a metaphysical conception of history shuns this historicity in favour of an ahistorical – even anti-historical – search for certainty, security, and surety in interpretive closure. A Derridean approach emphasises that historical meaning is always open: forever differing and deferring, it perpetually remains just out of reach.

*History ‘to Come’*

Deconstruction is motivated by a certain historical openness: it aims to disturb, dislocate, displace, disarticulate or put ‘out of joint’ the authority of an approach to history that claims something ‘is’ something.\(^8\) A deconstructive strategy, then, constantly problematises accepted theories or practices and, above all else, refuses to accept – or allow to solidify – notions of ‘the way things really were’.\(^9\) History, on this view, must remain oriented towards the future rather than being absolutised, stabilised, or in any sense closed off. For Derrida this seemingly paradoxical future orientation is figured in the concept of the archive.\(^9\) At first archives seem to point backwards in time. Derrida argues, however, that in another sense the question of the archive is never a question of the past:\(^1\)

> It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come. Perhaps. Not tomorrow but in times to come, later on or perhaps never. A spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive and ties it, like religion, like history, like science itself, to a very singular experience of the promise.\(^2\)

The archivist ‘always produces more archive’:\(^3\) in this way, for Derrida, the concept of the archive is about unfinished business. It ‘opens out of the future’.\(^4\) This future, however, is not merely some present-in-the-future or future-present, but, rather, a future that is perpetually *to come*:

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91. Ibid., 34-5.
92. Ibid., 36, emphasis added.
94. Ibid., 68.
a horizon-less, un-circumscribed, radically undecidable, future. As such ‘nothing is less reliable’, insists Derrida, or ‘less clear than the . . . archive’.95 Every archive, with its indeterminate meaning, poses a problem for translation. But it is precisely because there is such unreliability, lack of clarity and indeterminacy that translation of the archive – or historical interpretation – is possible in the first place.

In this sense, then, the ‘problem of the archive’ – the ‘problem of history’ itself – is constitutive of its own (im)possibility. On this basis a Derridean approach appeals for a reconfiguration of the realm of the historical; not as something closed and abiding but as always already open: a history to come.

Resisting the ‘Historical Turn’ in IR: Bringing the ‘Problem of History’ In

Historical imagination within IR, as Jonathan Isacoff has argued, is somewhat limited.96 To a large extent it has been fettered by the lingering hegemony of scientific positivism; although this has begun to wane since the 1990s, certainly in the UK if perhaps less so in the US.97 The development of the discipline along the lines of scientific positivism fostered a privileging of research methods and design over questions about history.98 Thus, according to Thomas Smith, although IR is in many ways a ‘child of [the discipline of] History’ it has nevertheless ‘tried to distance itself from historical discussion’.99 Superficially, the various turns identified by Teschke, Bell, and Hobden suggest that, with its recently increased attention to the historical record, IR is now more sensitive to history. Yet, on the basis of our discussion of critical historiography and, more significantly still, the work of Jacques Derrida, I want to argue for the need to exercise caution here.

The stunning lack of reflection on what is meant by history in the discourse of the historical turn in IR implies that a particular view of the past is presupposed: the traditionalist ‘truth at the end of enquiry’ approach both critical historiographers and Derrida, though often in different ways, warn against. Obviously, as Finney is quick to point out, all generalisations about how history might or might not be perceived in the field of IR are ‘perilous and contestable’.100 However, one does not

95. Ibid., 90.
96. Isacoff, ‘Historical Imagination’.
98. Smith, History, 11.
99. Ibid., 1.
100. Finney, ‘Still Marking Time?’, 293.
have to look far to find instances of this traditionalism, even if writers are not out to defend it in quite the same way as Marwick, Stone, and Evans have done. For example, in the introduction to one of the most significant contributions to the literature concerned with the relationship between History and IR, Colin and Miriam Elman note that: ‘the historians represented in this volume . . . would share the international relations theorists’ commitment to uncovering an objectively knowable past’.101

This quotation reflects the way in which a traditionalist view of history can be said to prevail in both disciplines. This view of history, as we have already seen, is hugely problematic: its enduring but misplaced commitment to the possibility of ‘uncovering an objectively knowable past’ sidesteps the ‘problem of history’ by resting on an ‘unexamined metaphysical faith in its [history’s] capacity to speak a sovereign voice of suprahistorical truth’.102 The worry is that the discourse of the historical turn in IR perpetuates rather than displaces the tendency to privilege structure and space over context and time in our analyses of world politics. In other words by glossing over the ‘problem of history’ the discourse of the historical turn actually runs the risk of facilitating the continued hegemony of an ahistorical or at worst anti-historical research culture in IR. This historical turn must therefore be resisted if the discipline of IR is to be faithful to the historicity of history.

Drawing on the work of Derrida it is possible to envisage such resistance: what it might consist of, and how it could have huge implications for the way we think about the past in our study of international relations. Many scholars of both History and IR have typically responded to the challenge of what they tend to call post-structuralist103 thought with ‘varying degrees of scepticism, antagonism or horror’.104 To a large extent, especially in the context of the relationship between history and IR, this response is part of the wider perception that theory (especially so-called ‘left-bank theory’) and history do not mix. Recognising the need to alter this perception, for instance, provides the

103. Of course this term is fraught with difficulties; not least that most writers with whom it most commonly associated would deny its salience. Derrida, for example, is ‘eager to maintain [the concept of ‘post-structuralism’] as suspect and problematic’. Jacques Derrida, ‘Deconstruction: The Im-Possible’, in French Theory in America, eds. Sylvere Lotringer and Sande Cohen (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 16.
rationale for Elman and Elman’s volume. The book is very much written in the spirit of bringing theory (though not ‘left-bank theory’) and history together. But there is a sense in which the problem here is the editorial starting point: the problematic separation between history and theory to begin with. This separation is commonly made within all quarters of IR. For example, even Richard Ashley makes the distinction when he calls for the re-privileging of history over theory.\textsuperscript{105} The concern here is that by seeing history and theory as occupying fundamentally different terrains we end up reproducing the impression that ‘theorists’ won’t do/can’t do history and that ‘historians’ won’t do/can’t do theory. Immediately we are back within the confines of the historiographical debate between Munslow, Jenkins, and White on the one hand and Marwick, Stone, and Evans on the other. Deconstruction, in contrast, refuses to draw this line between ‘the historical’ and ‘the theoretical’. Rather, as Sergei Prozorov notes, deconstructive political criticism is ‘\textit{ipso facto} historical’.\textsuperscript{106}

For Derrida, ‘deconstruction resists theory’.\textsuperscript{107} Contra Ashley’s suggestion that ‘post-structuralist discourse remains theoretical discourse’,\textsuperscript{108} deconstruction does not resemble a coherent system of theory insofar as ‘it demonstrates the impossibility of closure, of the closure of an ensemble, or totality or an organised network of theorems, laws, rules, [and] methods’.\textsuperscript{109} Rather, a deconstructive strategy can be considered as a sort of ‘jetty’\textsuperscript{110} from which forms of closure or totalisation may be resisted. This resistance, furthermore, is resistance not only against theory but approaches to the past that ignore, or feign to have solved, the ‘problem of history’. Hence Derrida argues:

\begin{quote}
The deconstructive jetty is, throughout, motivated, set into motion by a concern with history, even if it leads to destabilising certain concepts of history, the absolutising or hypostasing concept of a neo-Hegelian or Marxist kind, the Husserlian concept of history, and even the Heideggerian concept of historical epochality.\textsuperscript{111}
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{105} Ashley, ‘Border Lines’, 279.
\textsuperscript{108} Ashley, ‘Border Lines’, 279.
\textsuperscript{109} Derrida, ‘Statements and Truisms’, 85-6.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 92, emphasis added.
\end{flushright}
The traditionalist conception of history – the primary basis for historical approaches within IR as well as History – abandons the openness of historical meaning in favour of interpretive closure. It imposes borders within and between texts which, ultimately, were/are never there. A deconstructive perspective exposes and then ‘dislocates [these] borders, the framing of texts, everything which should preserve their immanence and make possible an internal reading’\(^\text{112}\) in order to bring in the fundamental indeterminacy of history and recover historicity. On this basis an understanding of history in terms of \textit{differance} calls for resistance against those approaches feigning to historicise IR under the deceptive banner of the ‘historical turn’ in favour of an openness towards historicity as history \textit{to come}.

The Derridean treatment of ‘the problem of history’ as \textit{differance} is not abstract, or theoretical, or even obscure or occult as some detractors of deconstruction would have us believe. On the contrary, the problem it resists – the problem of side-stepping the ‘problem of history’ – is at play within concrete practices in both academic and non-academic life. Moreover, as writers such as David Campbell\(^\text{113}\) and Alan Feldman\(^\text{114}\) have shown against empirical backdrops as diverse as Bosnia and Northern Ireland, this refusal of the ‘problem of history’ for the sake of simplistic diagnoses of conflict production and solution all too often have significant ethico-political ramifications that go unnoticed. The challenge, following Derrida’s reconfiguration of the way we look at the past, is to insist that historicity or the ‘problem of history’ is brought to the centre of our analyses of aspects of world politics. This involves, as Campbell puts it, privileging an ethos of ‘continual contestation’ in interpretations of historical phenomena over faulty ‘aspirations of synthesis and totality’\(^\text{115}\).

Conclusions: History and ‘the Problem of International Relations’?

\textit{Prima facie} the recent emergence of the discourse of the ‘historical turn’ suggests that IR has shrugged off its pseudo-scientific pretensions in favour of greater sensitivity to history. Yet, despite an increasing propensity for writers to turn to the historical record, there has been little critical reflection on what view of the past is presupposed in mainstream IR. The debate over the past two or three decades between so-called

\(^{112}\) Ibid., 92-3.
\(^{113}\) Campbell, \textit{National Deconstruction}.
\(^{114}\) Feldman, \textit{Formations of Violence}.
\(^{115}\) Campbell, ‘MetaBosnia’, 281.
'traditionalist historians' and 'critical historiographers', though as we have seen not unproblematic, highlights the intrinsic 'problem of history' so often glossed over or ignored in the IR literature. Here the 'problem of history' refers to the impossibility of arriving at a closed interpretation of the meaning of history in any given context even when attempts at such closure are made. Drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, however, it has been argued that it is precisely because there is a 'problem' concerning historical meaning that there is such a thing as historicity in the first place.

The upshot of this over-arching argument is that it is better to think of the problem here (that is, 'problem' in the conventional sense; a stumbling block) not as history but rather the way in which mainstream IR continues to refuse ‘the problem of history’. This continued refusal casts doubt on whether Bell, Teschke, Hobden and other contemporary surveyors of the disciplinary landscape are justified in referring to a turn to history. Rather, in leading students of IR to believe their discipline is now historical, the discourse of the historical turn merely reifies a particular view of the past: one that, predicated upon interpretive closure, denies respect for the intrinsic undecidability of historical meaning by fixing it according to a suprahistorical ‘sovereign voice of apocalyptic objectivity’.

On this basis I have argued that the historical turn must be resisted. In order to historicise the concepts, logics, and theories with which we study international relations it is necessary not to bring ‘history’, but more specifically the ‘problem of history’ into the discipline. A deconstructive approach, with its attentiveness to undecidability and openness and its denial of fixity and closure, takes the radical indeterminacy of historical meaning as the object of its analysis rather than something to be side-stepped. Such an approach, it must be emphasised, does not seek nor purport to solve the ‘problem of history’ in IR to which Smith refers; on the contrary, following Patočka, it demands that the ‘problem of history’ must be seen to be and remain, precisely, as a problem in our analyses of world politics.

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