



## THE NEXT THIRTY YEARS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS RESEARCH New Topics, New Methods, and the Challenge of Big Data

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## The Next Thirty Years of International Relations Research New Topics, New Methods, and the Challenge of Big Data\*

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For someone who trained to be a historian in the US in the 1990s, the boom in international, transnational, and global history represents a remarkable turn of events. Just thirty years ago, the more traditional form of diplomatic history seemed to be on the edge of extinction. It has not only survived, but thrived by reinventing itself as part of a vastly expanded field of research on the history of world politics. This includes new topics such as biopolitics, social movements, and global governance. But this work is also distinguished by a revival of multi-archival, international research, a method that dates back to the 19th century graduate seminars of Leopold von Ranke.

The challenge of the next thirty years is to consolidate recent gains and resist any complacency – the kind of complacency that permitted less rigorous forms of research and reduced diplomatic history to a shrinking subfield of national history. This essay provides a view from the US, but it aims to show how international historians in every country could achieve much more: establishing a true global community of scholars engaged in the study of world politics. But they must also work together to develop new methods to cope with an emerging challenge: the era of “big data.” Whereas in the past historians travelled the world in search of sources, in the future we will instead find it ever more difficult to cope with the avalanche of digitized and “born-digital”

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\* Parts of this essay – mainly the discussion of the crisis and recovery of international history in the US – originally appeared as part of a forum in the September 2011 issue of *Passport*, “SHAFR in the World.”

archives that are crashing down on top of us. This essay will conclude with some concrete suggestions. But it first requires surveying the struggles that have brought us to this point.

In the 1970s and 1980s the field of diplomatic history was in crisis. It seemed stagnant when compared to the rise of social history, and left behind by the cultural turn. But it was not just that scholars in these fields increasingly ignored the study of American foreign relations. Leading diplomatic historians both in the US and abroad were also deeply dissatisfied with much of the work as it was then being done, and called for a more international approach. Christopher Thorne, Charles Maier<sup>1</sup>, and Sally Marks<sup>2</sup> pointed out that it was impossible to understand the impact the US had in the world without doing research abroad. Others, such as Ernest May and Gabriel Kolko, also called for giving greater attention to structures, reflecting the influence of Fernand Braudel's work far beyond France.

But these arguments were largely ignored, as most American diplomatic historians continued working only in American archives. They insisted that they were uniquely concerned with power, which really meant that they were the only ones who cared about presidential decision-making in war and diplomacy. They seemed unaware of how other fields had a broader conception of power, in part because of the outsized impact of another French scholar, Michel Foucault. This included the power of patriarchy, the power of racism, and all the relations of power that are enshrined in law and enforced in courts, or expressed through new technologies, or in the management of natural resources and human bodies, and so on.

Defining diplomatic history as uniquely concerned with power was not only mistaken, it was self-defeating. In the 1990s, leading departments in the U.S. were opting not to replace retiring diplomatic historians. And when there were important initiatives to internationalize US history, such as those featured in the 1992 *Journal of American History* (JAH), and the 1997 La Pietra conference<sup>3</sup>, diplomatic historians were not

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Maier, "Marking Time: The Historiography of International Relations", in Michael Kammen (ed.), *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, Ithaca, 1980.

<sup>2</sup> Sally Marks, "The World According to Washington," *Diplomatic History*, no. 11, Summer 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Bender (ed.), *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2002.

in the lead. Aside from a few standouts, like Akira Iriye, they were largely absent – absent from the pages of the *JAH* and the *American Historical Review*, and absent from national conference programs, to the point that diplomatic historians began to organize protests and complain to the media.

To some extent, diplomatic historians were victims of academic fashion. But there was also a deeper problem: too many practitioners were content with defining foreign relations as a sub-field of US history. This never made sense intellectually – who were we relating *to*, after all, if not the rest of the world? – and certainly not politically, if one cared about recruiting graduate students and communicating research to colleagues. Why, after all, would anyone want to join a group that insisted it was a small and unappreciated subfield of US history?

As long as US diplomatic historians defined themselves as a sub-field of US history, they faced the thankless task of persuading other Americanists that foreign policy remained important, and more important than newer subjects such as gender and sexuality, the environment and material culture, or science and technology. Why should one have expected them to cede space in conference programs and journals, give up faculty lines, or share PhD fellowships? “It is difficult,” as Upton Sinclair once observed, “to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it”.<sup>4</sup>

Diplomatic history finally began to enjoy a renaissance when it was no longer merely a subfield of US history, or any national history, but instead became part of a larger project: creating the big and still expanding fields of international and transnational history. Diplomatic history is international in the sense that, even when working on US foreign relations, more practitioners now work in multiple countries. And it is transnational because they explore all of the ways Americans are connected to the rest of the world, whether through migration, new media, religious movements, environmental change, or epidemic disease. In this way, diplomatic historians could count themselves as part of the global community of scholars interested not just in war and diplomacy, but also international and non-governmental organizations, trade and monetary policy, scientific and technological innovation, and

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<sup>4</sup> Upton Sinclair, *I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked*, Oakland, University of California Press, 1994.

countless other subjects that connect different countries or transcend the boundaries between them.

There had always been powerful arguments for this broader vision. But recent history made it irresistible. The study of world politics has long been motivated by contemporary concerns. After the end of the Cold War, scholars wanted to explore the many ways the world had been changing, and not just through inter-state diplomacy. And they also recognized that, in the longer sweep of history, the era in which nation-states ran the world may be exceptional, as global politics once again became more pluralistic, with many more and different kinds of actors jostling for power.

There were many inspiring calls for international and transnational history. For some time, it was not clear whether they would actually lead to compelling new work – work that would connect different parts of the world while still attending to the context and particularity of each place. Over the last decade, this challenge has been met. To name a few examples of recent work in international history published in English, there is Margaret MacMillan on the diplomacy of Versailles,<sup>5</sup> Erez Manela on the international impact of Wilson’s call for self-determination,<sup>6</sup> Jeremi Suri on the global 1968 and the diplomacy of détente,<sup>7</sup> Piero Gleijeses on Castro’s support for revolution in Africa,<sup>8</sup> Arne Westad’s study of the superpowers and proxy wars,<sup>9</sup> Mary Sarotte’s account of the reunification of Germany,<sup>10</sup> and Lien-Hang Nguyen’s book on Hanoi’s war with the US.<sup>11</sup>

In my own work I have been gradually shifting from international to transnational history. It started with a study of how the Algerian

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<sup>5</sup> Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World*, New York, Random House, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Jeremi Suri, *The Global Revolutions of 1968*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Piero Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976-1991*, Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of our Times*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*, The New Cold War History Series, Chapel Hill, UNC Press, 2012.

National Liberation Front gained independence by isolating France from its allies and winning diplomatic recognition – all this without ever liberating national territory.<sup>12</sup> I found that it was impossible to explain this improbable victory without accounting for the rising power of labor diasporas, the international media, and international organizations. My last book was a global history of the population control movement.<sup>13</sup> With the declining significance of territory as a source of national power, the control of the fertility and movement of populations became a crucial arena. Scientists and activists worked with and through sovereign states, but ultimately sought to control the population of the world without having to answer to anyone in particular.

There are now many more works on transnational social movements, such as Cemil Aydin's comparative and connected history of Pan-Asianism and Pan-Islamism,<sup>14</sup> and Nick Cullather's new history of the Green Revolution,<sup>15</sup> Alison Bashford's new work on world population,<sup>16</sup> and Daniel Sargent's study of how Americans responded to globalization in the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> And there are more in the pipeline, such as Brad Simpson's project on how Suharto used international and non-governmental organizations to rule Indonesia,<sup>18</sup> and Simon Stevens' history of the anti-Apartheid movement.

Altogether, a more global and transnational perspective reveals that, long before the end of the Cold War, demographic growth and movement, environmental change, new means of mass communication, interdependent capital markets, and international and transnational organizations were combining to cause dramatic change of a recognizably new kind. This broader vision has not only revealed the origins of the contemporary era, it is restoring the study of world politics

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<sup>12</sup> Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Alison Bashford, *Global Population: History, Geopolitics, and Life on Earth*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Brad Simpson, *Indonesia's New Order, the US, and the World Community, 1966-1998*, New York, Cornell University Press (forthcoming).

to the forefront of historical inquiry. Research on the regulation of migration, science and philanthropy, public health and epidemic disease, international sport and tourism, communications networks, multinational corporations, and consumer culture can connect global processes to local and even intimate experiences, such as how we shop, count calories, and use contraception.

These are not all new subjects, but this new generation brings to bear multi-archival, international research, in many ways reminiscent of diplomatic history of the old school. They also have a larger vision of how their work can add up to a new history of the world. Challenges to state sovereignty, the changing significance of territory, the growing salience of biopolitics, and the increasing density of cross-border transactions have come to define a deeper understanding of the recent past. It does not make artificial distinctions between internal and external affairs, and it is not limited to the level of inter-state relations. Students of international and transnational history are thus proving that it is not just a fad. One can begin to see a body of work that shows not just promise, or potential, but major accomplishments.

Along with the success of international and transnational history come new challenges. To begin with the obvious, one needs to recognize one's limits. The term transnational means little, and the term international means nothing, in periods and places devoid of nations, which is to say most of world history. It was only in the last three centuries that nations came to displace other kinds of polities – empires, city states, etc. It is only then that we can begin to speak of international history, and contrast it with the history that transcended or subverted national boundaries.

Moreover, a lot of history is local and national. Not every topic will reward a larger frame of analysis. Some are invoking the idea of international and transnational history for the wrong reasons – not because it can help answer important but otherwise perplexing historical questions, but because of how it can make us feel about ourselves. Especially over the last decade, it has become a way of positioning oneself outside of – and in opposition to – national history as intrinsically nationalistic. But if we study subjects like international organizations and transnational social movements, it should not be to celebrate them, but so that we can understand them.

Perhaps because my own university, Columbia, is in New York, and one can't help but notice the UN headquarters on the other side of town, my colleagues and I have been publishing a series of new, more critical histories of international norms and international organizations. Adam McKeown's *Melancholy Order* examined how the spread of universal suffrage helped justify an inter-state system that would sharply curtail freedom of movement.<sup>19</sup> Susan Pedersen is writing a history of the League of Nations mandate system that will show how it aimed to internationalize imperialism. Mark Mazower's last two books, *No Enchanted Palace* and *Governing the World*, describes the UN as designed and built to defend empires and adapt them to a more nationalistic era.<sup>20</sup> Sam Moyn's *The Last Utopia* argues that the very idea of human rights was all but irrelevant to the UN in its first quarter century.<sup>21</sup> My earlier work showed how the UN eventually became a forum for national liberation movements to protest against imperial repression. But my more recent history of the population control movement sought to explain how a global campaign ostensibly dedicated to women's rights and environmental protection turned into a war on the poor.

Many other American universities – notably Berkeley, Chicago, Cornell, Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Texas, and Virginia – are also building programs in international, transnational, and global history. Large crowds turn out for plenary sessions on these approaches at annual conferences. Leading scholarly journals regularly feature articles and forums that showcase the results. University presses are creating series for new books in these fields. And there is also a large popular audience for work that can explain the changing nature of international relations, such as for Fred Logeval's Pulitzer-prize winning history of how the US followed the French into defeat in Indochina.<sup>22</sup> In each case, historians of US foreign relations have been at the forefront in these new initiatives. The study of US diplomacy therefore has a secure place in the historical profession, *but only because it is now just part of a much larger project.*

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<sup>19</sup> Adam McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2009. Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea*, New York, Penguin Press, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*, New York: Random House, 2012.



But for these very reasons, those of us who now feel confident about the strength of this field should think harder about the larger place of the historical profession. History departments across the US have seen declining enrollments in history classes, part of a larger trend in which students worried about their job prospects have turned toward what appear to be more practical pursuits. For new history PhDs., the recent recession has been catastrophic. There is also a long and worsening crisis in academic publishing. And there is little evidence that historians are having much influence in major national decisions, or even relatively minor decisions that have a big impact on our own profession – such as the leadership of the US National Archives.

We cannot therefore be complacent, especially considering the new challenges anyone who aspires to do international, multi-archival research will face over the decades to come. To state the obvious, von Ranke did not have to cope with a world of 196 countries. The growth in the number of international and non-governmental organizations has been even more vertiginous. As we all know, it is impossible for anyone to read every language, go to every archive, or interview every person who has made history. And the further we go toward creating global histories, the harder it becomes for different historians to analyze the same evidence and compare their conclusions.

The digitization of archives would appear to make international research more practical. But the proliferation of on-line sources has also begun to reveal the true dimensions of the challenge. Beginning in the 1970s, many documents were “born digital,” and electronic files will therefore become available all at once and on a massive scale. This occurred in a haphazard way with Wikileaks, but we will almost certainly see many more such releases – official as well as unofficial – in years to come. What happens when we try to write the social history of our time and find that Facebook users exchanged over 300 million messages a day? Long before then, we will likely find that traditional research methods that center on closely reading every relevant source have become increasingly impractical.

Diplomatic historians would appear to have a more manageable problem, especially if they stick with the state archives of just one country. But consider what the US National Archives website already makes available from the period 1973-76: some 1.1 million full-text State Department cables. That’s about a billion words, and four times more

documents than are contained in the WikiLeaks cables. If archivists can keep to schedule – and they are already struggling – each year will bring another tranche of documents as large or larger than the WikiLeaks release. Altogether, some 27 million documents accumulated in the Central Foreign Policy files between 1973 and 2006, to say nothing of documents in other State Department collections, other federal departments and agencies, and – not least – other government (and non-governmental) archives.

And yet, as many US documents as are now becoming available, a growing proportion are not released, either because they may contain private information or concern matters that are still considered state secrets. In 2011 alone, the US declassified some 27 million pages of documents, but another 25 million pages were withheld. It's estimated that there are only 41 archivists at the National Archives to work on 700,000 cubic feet of unprocessed records, and they do not even attempt to estimate the volume of unprocessed electronic records.

The scale of the challenge has led archivists to adopt software that automatically segregates documents that might contain personal or classified information. It reportedly has a high false-positive rate. Even when archivists review documents individually, they typically make an up or down decision, and it is much easier to authorize the release of documents on mundane matters, even if researchers would not find them worth reviewing. The vast majority of documents that present any concern are withheld, while only a small fraction are released with sensitive information redacted (usually because they are requested by individual researchers, whether through the Freedom of Information Act, or for publication in an official collection like *Foreign Relations of the United States*). So while archivists focused on swiftly reducing the backlog are reviewing and releasing more and more documents, they are withholding a higher proportion of the documents that will actually be interesting to historians.

Staff at the US National Archives have also used crude methods of statistical sampling to identify collections to delete or destroy. While protocols specify that they should review all of the documents in a sample before deciding, in the great majority of cases they have to make quick decisions based on a partial reading. And the guidelines call for retaining documents related to traditional national security concerns and discarding everything else. For this reason, some six million

documents related to passports and visas were designated as not worth preserving for more than fifteen years, and State Department documents on cultural diplomacy and international sport also went to the ash heap of history.

The challenge of “big data” therefore has huge implications for how the fields of international, transnational, and global history will develop in years to come. Will historians overwhelmed by the scale of archives just for one country continue to take up the challenge of international research? Conversely, will those who would like to study migration, “soft power,” and other non-traditional subjects find that, decades earlier, archivists destroyed the relevant collections because they did not have the resources to catalog and preserve them?

But this challenge also presents opportunities. To begin with, historians of international relations will be among the first to cope with it. In the US, the State Department adopted computerized record keeping before almost any other federal agency. And unlike private companies that own most of the data relevant for social, cultural, and intellectual history – such as Google’s collection of 20 million digitized books – the government is required by law to release the documentary record of its activities, or at least explain why it has not done so. Answering the demand for declassification has led to massive digitization efforts, such as the Remote Archival Capture program, in which the CIA plans to scan all presidential papers between the Johnson and Reagan administrations. Many of them are now available on presidential library websites. There are also plans to create a “one-stop shop” for full-text declassified documents, [foiaonline.gov](http://foiaonline.gov). While few agencies participate, and the site is often non-functional, it could eventually be a boon to researchers.

Thus, the history of international relations is extremely rich in data, most of it in the public domain. And historians who discover new ways to do research in large electronic files such as these will have the opportunity to establish norms and practices for the rest of the profession. This could include the adoption of techniques like data-mining to detect unusual patterns of communications, topic modeling to show the rise and fall of different foreign policy priorities over time, and geographic information systems and other forms of data visualization to reveal spatial and temporal relationships on a large-scale.

But it is unlikely that historians will be able to do this on their own, and there is no good reason why they should want to. Research in “Natural Language Processing” – *i.e.* turning words into data – is well-advanced and well-funded. Some disciplines, such as literary analysis, have been much quicker to forge connections to computer science, such as in the field of authorship attribution. While it is true that new tools and new software have made some techniques easier to manage, some of the most popular are deeply flawed. Google’s Ngram viewer, for instance, generates fascinating graphs displaying the relative frequency of words, names, and phrases in a database of 5 million digitized books published over hundreds of years. But because of copyright issues, it is impossible to tell which books are being counted, and which are left out, precluding the source criticism essential for historical research.

If historians begin to work alongside of computer scientists, we will have the opportunity to develop new approaches more attuned to the need for source criticism, transparency, and empirical verification. But this requires rethinking the solo-author model. Instead, we will have to consider the possibility of creating true laboratories that will bring together junior and senior researchers to take on large-scale historical problems.

I conducted one such experiment recently, building off of a summer research program on the history and future of nuclear proliferation. After we disbanded at the end of August 2010, I continued working with nine of my students in cyberspace. We decided to focus on the history of intelligence estimates, war games, and technology forecasts. We pooled our research in a cloud-based database, shared ideas through virtual meetings, and then co-wrote the article on-line. It was eventually published by the *American Historical Review*.<sup>23</sup> This study of the history of the future thus represents one possible future for historical research.

Going forward, it is likely that “history labs” will create their own tools, and not just take them “off the shelf.” For instance, I am now working with computer scientists and statisticians to analyze the large corpus of partially and fully declassified documents. We are using techniques from natural language processing and machine learning to discern the broad patterns of official secrecy.

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<sup>23</sup> Matthew Connelly *et al.*, “General: I Have Fought Just as Many Nuclear Wars As You Have’: Forecasts, Future Scenarios, and the Politics of Armageddon,” *American Historical Review*, no. 5, 2012, p. 1431-1460.

Historians know that official secrecy creates an inherent bias in the archive, and have had to depend on our own intuition to correct for that bias. Doing that more systematically, and on a large scale, depends on obtaining “supervised data,” i.e. documents that show what officials have sought to conceal. One way to do it is to find “sanitized” and “de-sanitized” versions of the same document. But another is to find different accounts of international meetings, such as the memoranda of conversation that are deposited in the archives of different archives.

We can leverage this kind of data in building statistical models that can predict what kinds of documents are more likely to remain classified. We also hope to develop means to attribute authorship to anonymous documents. Making declassified documents more accessible and providing tools to analyze the data and visualize it across time would itself spur new discoveries. For instance, the frequency of diplomatic cables will spike during known crises, but we will also see spikes for unknown reasons that merit investigation. More generally, by analyzing over a million cables – a true cross-section of diplomacy – we can reveal how information flowed, measure influence, and determine whether historical figures were initiating or reacting to events.

Ultimately, it might be possible to create a central repository where journalists and scholars can feed documents into a “declassification engine,” retrieve matching or similar documents, and in that way help improve the power and accuracy of tools that can indicate what it is we are *not* seeing. Such a platform could reveal the hidden corners of history, provide new insights about the past, help restore the integrity of the historical record, and become an essential resource for a more informed public.

The future of international history is therefore extremely bright. But adapting to the challenges ahead – especially the challenge of understanding a world of two hundred states and countless non-state actors – will require us to rethink methods that were created for a very different era in world politics. And we will need to think harder about how to preserve the historical record and keep it accessible in this new era of “big data.” If we do not work together, concerns about privacy, the expanding scope of official secrecy, and the unprecedented challenge of preserving massive electronic records will make it increasingly difficult even to do basic historical research.

We cannot meet these challenges unless likeminded historians from different countries begin working more closely together. I would therefore propose we work toward a federation of associations for international and transnational history, in which organizations like the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations would be national affiliates. We can only benefit from sharing our work with scholars from the places we study. But we can also work together to advance a common agenda, such as comparing and coordinating strategies for preserving the historical record, promoting our research, strengthening our position in our respective departments and universities, and creating support networks for both junior and senior scholars when they travel abroad for archival research and interviews.

History is not always a reliable guide to the future. But it would seem safe to assume that the next thirty years of international relations research will likely be no less crucial than the last thirty years.