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# COMMENTARY

## Tradition, Cause and Effect, and the Cultural History of International Relations

The editor of this journal has asked me to react to Andrew Rotter's essay, using it as a springboard for discussion of the larger issues of doing cultural history. What, I am asked, does this framework add to traditional approaches, and what are its limits and shortcomings? I take this as an invitation to place my remarks in the context of debates over the usefulness and even the legitimacy of "cultural" analysis in diplomatic history that have appeared over the last few years in the pages of this journal, on the H-DIPLO electronic discussion list, and at professional conferences. This debate among historians of international relations mirrors the larger debate in the profession over so-called post-modernist (a much-abused epithet) approaches that analyze language and culture, gender, race, class, etc. as elements of social power and historical experience. In the eyes of "traditionalists," this proliferation of de-centered narratives, subversive of claims to objective truth, threatens a dangerous fragmentation and loss of legitimacy for the discipline as a whole. This is a complex and muddled controversy because participants are divided over both ideology and epistemology. Objections to, or defenses of "cultural" history can cut across both categories at once, and the premises that undergird interlocutors' positions are usually not made explicit.[1]

The debate is in part a product of the culture of the discipline – an outgrowth of the dialectic between innovation and rigor that demands that we ask ourselves whether these new approaches really contribute something significant to the traditional practice of diplomatic history. But it also occurs in the context

1. See, for instance, the symposium on "Culture, Gender, and Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History* 18 (Winter 1994): 47–124; Melvyn Leffler, "New Approaches, Old Interpretations, and Prospective Reconfigurations," ibid. 19 (Spring 1995): 173–96; Robert Buzzanco, "What Happened to the New Left?" ibid. 23 (Fall 1999): 575–607; and the discussion threads titled "Gendered Discourse" and "Masculinity as Ideology," H-DIPLO electronic list, accessible at www.h-net.msu.edu/~diplo. See also "A Round Table: Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations," *Journal of American History* 77 (June 1990): 93–180, and "AHR Forum: Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream:* The Objectivity Question and the Future of the Historical Profession," *American Historical Review* 96 (June 1991): 675–708.

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of widespread professional anxieties about "market share" in an era of academic "downsizing," leading some, perhaps, to glib dismissals of cultural approaches as opportunistic attempts to jump on the bandwagon of current academic fashion, and as "methodologically" unsound in the use of evidence and argument. Underlying the discomfort of some critics, of course, is an ideological disagreement; the cultural history of the Cold War as recently practiced provides little support for the "triumphalism" that has gotten much play recently. I'm going to suggest, though, that the "new" cultural history of diplomacy is very similar in method to traditional approaches in the use of evidence and argument, but that disagreements over the nature and purposes of historical explanation itself lie at the intellectual root of the controversy. Let me start my plunge from the springboard into the deep water of these debates with a brief assessment of the essay at hand and what it can tell us about the usefulness of a cultural history of diplomacy.

Andrew Rotter's essay illuminates one important aspect of the Cold War relationship between the United States and newly post-colonial Pakistan and India. Focusing on culturally constructed systems of religious belief held by the foreign policymakers of the three states, he shows how the Christian and Protestant world view of John Foster Dulles and other American officials colored their understanding of Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India. Rotter argues that the moral absolutes and binary oppositions of Christianity favorably predisposed American policymakers toward Muslim Pakistan with its similarly structured monotheism. Indian leaders, acting from the imperatives of their own national goals and possessed of the tolerance for ambiguity characteristic of polytheistic Hinduism, refused to recognize American "'moral superiority over the Communists,'" maintained a neutralist stance, and stood aloof from military alliances with either the United States or the Soviet Union. Pakistanis, desirous of military aid to strengthen their position against their subcontinental rival India, assured U.S. leaders of their abhorrence of communism; American leaders, lauding a "morally consistent" Muslim vision of good and evil, were persuaded by such claims. Thus, cultural meanings provided by ancient religious systems intersected in significant ways with the American policy of "containing" the Soviet Union. Convinced that Pakistan could provide a "'dependable bulwark against communism,'" the United States contracted a strategically questionable alliance with the Muslim nation.

It is here that Rotter's cultural analysis engages questions that animate "traditional" diplomatic history. The "American-Pakistani military alliance was based on a deeply flawed strategic vision," argues Robert McMahon. "The American strategic vision remained curiously inchoate and inconsistent. One searches through the voluminous American planning documents in vain for a more concrete explanation of the role that Pakistan was expected to play in the containment of Soviet influence and power." This presents a conundrum. If the American planners themselves could not articulate a coherent "strategic" reason for an alliance with Pakistan, how do we explain it? McMahon argues

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that U.S. officials believed, mistakenly, that the alliance "well served American geopolitical needs."[2]

What, then, might account for the mistake? By shifting the focus away from narrow conceptions of "strategic interest," Andy Rotter helps explain the apparent incoherence of U.S. policy in this instance. Systematic and comparative inquiry into the culturally constructed belief systems of John Foster Dulles, Jawaharlal Nehru, Liaquat Ali Khan, Mohammed Ali, and others provides the context that allows us to more fully understand the relationship among the United States, India, and Pakistan. It becomes clear that Dulles and the others were not simply making carefully reasoned decisions about military power and "national interests" based on a closed, internally consistent "strategic" calculus – they acted within and across larger cultural systems of meaning. For all the actors, religious conceptions of morality and social order used as templates to assess potential allies or enemies helped shape both the interpretation of actions and predictions about future behavior, and thus became an element of policy formation. To put this another way, religious beliefs became a part of the strategic reasoning of these national leaders. This makes problematic the implicit assumption of neorealist diplomatic history, that policymakers wielded a strictly bounded geopolitical logic to determine the optimum deployment of limited resources; thus, it opens the possibility for new kinds of questions and answers about the history of international relations. Both Rotter and McMahon tell us that in the search for military allies against the Soviets, Dulles reported to the National Security Council that he was "immensely impressed by the martial and religious characteristics of the Pakistanis." How significant was this expressed affinity? Using a cultural analysis that provides a larger context, Rotter shows us that religious ideology strongly shaped the "strategic" thinking that McMahon found "inchoate."[3]

Rotter is not arguing for "cultural determinism," but he is arguing, it seems to me, that an understanding of cultural context and "meaning" tells us significant things about "agency" – why leaders acted as they did, and how their own cultural beliefs helped shape the range of possible actions they considered. All meaning is dependent on context; "culture," as Rotter and others including myself use the term, includes the socially constructed context of communication and interaction that produces meaning among humans. How can diplomatic historians fully make sense of the actions of their traditional subjects, political leaders and decision makers if they do not thoroughly explore the way statesmen made sense of their world? It is worth noting, too, that Rotter's

2. Robert J. McMahon, "United States Cold War Strategy in South Asia: Making a Military Commitment to Pakistan, 1947–1954," *Journal of American History* 75 (December 1988): 813, 838–40. American military assistance, argues McMahon, deeply alienated India and Afghanistan, "fostered their ties with the Soviet Union," and "fatally undermined prospects for regional stability."

3. On the structure and purposes of neorealist diplomatic history and the assumptions about "strategy" imbedded in it see Anders Stephanson, "Ideology and Neorealist Mirrors," *Diplomatic History* 17 (Spring 1993): 285–95.

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method, his deployment of evidence and construction of argument, is "traditional"; he has read widely in primary and secondary sources, used a multiarchival approach, drawn on theory from cognate disciplines, and supported his argument with the kinds of documentary material familiar to any professionally trained historian.[4]

But, critics will object (if reaction to this essay follows established patterns): this approach does not produce the "best" explanation of the creation of the U.S.-Pakistani alliance. This line of argument asserts that cultural analysis fails to generate a ranked hierarchy of motives that somehow reveals the "objectively" true "causes" of events, the goal toward which all historians of international relations should strive. Here we encounter basic differences over what is possible from historical explanation.[5]

Twenty years ago, Gregory Bateson sorted out the "objectivity" illusion in an important but little discussed book, *Mind and Nature*. In the smallest of nutshells: our brains make the images we "perceive": perceptions are constructed from coded information transmitted through sense organs and neural pathways. Consequently, all experience is predicated on decoding and interpreting information, with meaning dependent on context. To that extent, all experience is subjective. This does not deny a "real" shared world, or that there are very real consequences to individuals or societies following from "bad" interpretations of the world. It means, though, that there is no place where one can find an unmediated access to "truth" and thus transcend the need to decode information and construct interpretations of the world. The so-called cultural approach to history permits a self-reflexive engagement with the "reality" that we are bound up in a historically contingent system of cultural codes that shape experience.[6]

I, for one, reject the notion that a single "best" explanation is possible for complex historical events. There are, of course, better or worse explanations. Explanation, as Bateson argued, consists of "mapping a description onto a tautology." The tautology in our case is the "theory" that explains the relationship between the pieces of the description. "Better" historical explanations give us a good match between the linked propositions of the theory/tautology and the description upon which it rests (it goes without saying that the description must be empirically persuasive). The problems inherent in the practice of a

4. Dulles quoted in McMahon, "Cold War Strategy," 832. Rotter's case for the significance of cultural systems of meaning in shaping the interactions among the United States, India, and Pakistan is reinforced by his earlier essay, "Gender Relations, Foreign Relations: The United States and South Asia, 1947–1964," *Journal of American History* 81 (September 1994): 518–42.

5. See Leffler, "New Approaches," 179–81; Buzzanco, "What Happened," 585–88.

6. Within the space constraints of this essay it is not possible to offer more than a rudimentary account of a small part of Bateson's argument. See *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York, 1979). Although Bateson is not a fashionable figure in today's academic controversies over "postmodernism," he offers a rigorous, systematic, empirical epistemology that offers a way out of the muddled arguments about "objectivity" and "relativism" (and much else). On the long history of the muddled debates see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), esp. chap. 15.

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cultural history of diplomacy are the same as those of traditional approaches – identifying the boundaries of inquiry, finding and assessing evidence, and constructing a meaningful narrative. In every case there is an element of the arbitrary in decisions about how we conceptually divide up the world in order to understand it. All historical explanations, traditional or otherwise, are grounded in theories about the way the world works (although these theories are often left implicit). These theories largely determine what evidence is to be considered and what is to be ignored. All attempts to explain human behavior require that we reduce the bewildering complexity of "reality" to manageable dimensions. Trained historians undertake this reductionism using models derived from the historical tradition, not from a verifiably "objective" template existing outside our own cultural assumptions. However, traditions evolve.

In his SHAFR presidential address, Melvyn Leffler summed up complaints common to many critics of the new emphasis on culture in diplomatic history. Such an approach fails to provide a satisfactory account of cause and effect, and it undermines the "notion of the individual as an autonomous self-conscious agent," goes the indictment. This implicitly presumes that the social world is a universe of "forces" and "impacts" acting along linear, billiard-ball chains of action and reaction. Such a conception of cause and effect is reinforced by our language, which emphasizes only one side of any interaction. But cause and effect within and between human societies is generated through complex circuits of communication, through processes of reciprocal interaction that occur in time; causation is often circular. The feedback loop is a better model than the billiard table. But our narrative conventions demand linear chains of cause and effect – this approach provides a payoff in the form of easily comprehensible patterns that correspond to the form of our essays and books (that is, beginning, middle, end). This creates an inevitable tension between our descriptive narratives and "real" cause and effect.

This all bears on the question of "the individual as an autonomous self-conscious agent." Individuals are social creatures whose identities are constructed through experience, and whose experience is mediated through culture. "Autonomy" indicates a relationship to others, not a thing or quality possessed by individuals. "Agency," too, describes relations between people, not a thing or even a "force." It follows that the nature and meaning of the "individual as an autonomous self-conscious agent" is not a universal given, but a historical question that must be answered with the particulars of time, place, and culture, including descriptions of the reciprocal interactions that constitute the relationships at issue. "Autonomy" and "agency" are relative terms that assume meaning only in relation to the larger system of power relationships in society. Diplomatic historians are often very concerned with the effects produced by the agency and autonomy of political leaders or other actors; but the power relationships that produce "autonomous agency" in leaders are inevitably a part of larger cultural configurations of difference, including those categories we label race, class, gender, religion, ethnicity, etc. Cultural analysis does not by any intrinsic

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quality evade questions of agency or cause and effect, but instead represents one kind of attempt to match description to a world of circular (or more complex) linkages of cause and effect. The exact nature of the questions asked and the narratives produced concerning power, agency, etc. will differ from "traditional" accounts, but are no less connected to "effects" in the real world. The systems of power that produce historically significant effects are not confined exclusively to state-to-state relations. As Emily Rosenberg has argued, they are "multiple and complex, arranged simultaneously through nation-states and regional relationships; through networks of capital communications and technology; through constructions of sex, gender, ethnicity, race, and nationality."[7]

Professor Leffler began his lament about the fragmentation of the profession by posing a series of oppositions supposedly emblematic of the abandonment of "objectivity" by "practitioners of cultural studies." Cultural historians are, he asserts, "concerned with discourses rather than subjects, structures rather than actions, process rather than agency, the construction of meaning rather than the definition of experience." But these are false dichotomies. Each paired concept stands in reciprocal relation to its mate. "Discourses" have consequences for "subjects," otherwise I suspect there would be little attention to the concept. "Actions," in any sense meaningful to historians, arise out of, and in relation to, social and political "structures." "Agency" describes a relationship to "process." To "define experience" requires some account of the historical "construction of meaning." Leffler goes on to make an even more puzzling assertion: "The new stress on culture, gender, and language should be understood, at least in part, as a repudiation of older categories of analysis that dealt with society, economy, and politics; with class, property, and income; with social structure and human motivation." Far from a repudiation, the new stress on culture, gender, and language should be understood as an attempt to ask new and significant questions about the real historical experience of people and their relationship to society, the economy, politics, class, property, etc.[8]

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7. Emily S. Rosenberg, "Turning to Culture," in *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations*, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine C. LeGrand, and Ricardo Salvatore (Durham, 1998), 510. On the underlying epistemological issues see Bateson, *Mind and Nature*. Anders Stephanson offered a brief, helpful comment on the "relevance" of culture/gender analysis to diplomatic history and the "cause and effect" assumptions underlying traditional narratives; see his posting, 17 March 1998, to H-DIPLO, "Masculinity as Ideology" thread (www.h-net.msu.edu/~diplo). The late anthropologist Eric R. Wolf's recent book *Envisioning Power: Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis* (Berkeley, 1999) offers a useful cross-cultural historical and theoretical perspective on the relations among culture, ideology, and social power.

8. Leffler, "New Approaches,"173, 180. My own work, to take one instance, examines the role of class and gender in domestic political battles over Cold War foreign policy and in the decision-making process itself. Kristin Hoganson shows how ideas and rhetoric about manhood shaped the politics leading to intervention in the Spanish-American War. Frank Costigliola argues that Kennan's "realist" calculations and policy recommendations were profoundly shaped by his "emotional" experience of Soviet and American society. Robert Dean, "Masculinity as Ideology: John F. Kennedy and the Domestic Politics of Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History* 22 (Winter 1998): 29–62; Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven, 1998); Frank Costigliola, "'Unceasing Pressure

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A "cultural" diplomatic history does threaten to complicate the explanation of motivation and behavior, one reason, I suspect, that it evokes denunciations or dismissals from historians invested in the creation of a "synthesis" or master narrative. Much of the new work implicitly or explicitly challenges the notion that historical effects are the outcomes of unitary, fully intentional agents, whose decisions are the rational product of more-or-less straightforward calculations of "interest." Likewise, it challenges the notion that the "interest" of states (however determined) is transparently represented by the occupants of the offices of the state. Making those assumptions simplifies the historian's job and makes for conventional and accessible narratives, whatever ideological position the interpretation takes.[9] But analysis that describes the many ways that humans can be divided by culture, class, gender, or race, even within themselves, opens up the possibility that for any given case, policymakers' motivations are multiple and complex, perhaps closely tied to geopolitical concerns or material interests, but not necessarily determined by them. "Motivation" is thus something to be explored as problematic, not taken as a given. For example: Frank Costigliola complicates our understanding of the origins of "containment" with his recent essay on gender, pathology, and George Kennan's "emotional" experience of U.S.-Soviet relations, showing how these ideas and experiences shaped "realist" arguments in the Long Telegram. Costigliola's article provides a case study demonstrating that influential policymakers act as embodied men, from a mix of motives and desires, many not accounted for by traditional narratives. It provides an expansion of the context for our understanding of cause and effect, perhaps complicating the creation of predictive law-like propositions about the behavior of states toward other states but surely telling us much of value about how policy was actually made.[10]

This sort of cultural analysis is bound to make some diplomatic historians uncomfortable for ideological and professional reasons, aside from the more abstract question of the intellectual legitimacy of the undertaking. As Anders Stephanson has argued in an essay on the neorealist tradition: "inscribed in their very object of inquiry is a tendency to use history to provide 'lessons' for real or imagined policymakers (and so in the process to legitimate power). One writes from the position of an ersatz policymaker, *simulating* power but not actually making history." Whatever its virtues, it tends to be history written from inside the cultural assumptions that structured the systems of power under analysis. In contrast, the recent cultural history of international relations has been written from outside those governing assumptions. Cultural inquiry is

for Penetration': Gender, Pathology, and Emotion in George Kennan's Formation of the Cold War," *Journal of American History* 83 (March 1997): 1309–39.

9. On the complicating effect of cultural history on the field of U.S. foreign relations see Rosenberg, "Turning to Culture."

10. See Costigliola, "'Unceasing Pressure.'" Costigliola's argument tells us much about "individual agency" because he doesn't assume that Kennan or his policy transparently represented the interests or intentions of a "class" (whether that class is that of "national security bureaucrats trying to preserve U.S. core values," or that of "agents of an expansionist state seeking global hegemony").

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dedicated to interrogating the very social and cultural categories that traditional narratives ignore or repress. For those who seek to offer counsel to the prince, cultural analysis may seem deliberately perverse in its questioning of power relationships expressed through constructions of sex and gender, race, class, etc. It does not make promises of predictive utility, and it provides no anchor for heroic narratives that flatter the prince.[11]

Interestingly, in practical terms the issue of what place to make for cultural studies in the field of diplomatic history is complicated by widespread anxiety that the subdiscipline itself has been relegated to the margins of the historical profession. We no longer command the market share and pride of place of our pre-post-modern glory. Many historians in other fields regard diplomatic history as an intellectual backwater; they brusquely dismiss the genre as hopelessly sclerotic. This appears to have provoked divergent responses by established diplomatic historians – one group has welcomed and encouraged new approaches, apparently from the conviction that new questions about power and foreign relations might yield valuable insights otherwise inaccessible, and with the hope that it might help reopen a genuine intellectual dialogue with skeptical colleagues in other fields of history.[12]

Another group, however, seems to argue that diplomatic historians should police the boundaries of the discipline to exclude cultural history as an ideologically (that is, "PC" driven) and epistemologically (insufficiently "objective") dubious undertaking. A more sophisticated variant of this is Professor Leffler's strategy of containment: "we should all welcome arguments that take note of the new categories and configurations and demonstrate why the older ones remain more persuasive." By carefully subordinating cultural analysis to the preexisting "synthesis" and its explanatory trinity of "political economy, geopolitics, and power," diplomatic historians "will write monographs and syntheses for which our colleagues in other fields will yearn."[13] Perhaps, but I won't hold my breath. Many historians regard cultural history as an entirely respectable intellectual undertaking that on its own terms has generated much valuable scholarship. Attempting to exclude or contain it seems likely only to increase the marginalization of diplomatic history. Unless one conceives of the historical profession as a constant-sum game, I fail to see the advantage of the exclusionary effort. Doctrinal purity is bound to be an elusive goal in today's academy, and counterproductive to the creation of knowledge. Instead, let a thousand flowers bloom. Cultural history does cut across the old subdisciplinary boundaries, but in ways that are reinvigorating the history of international relations.

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11. Stephanson, "Ideology and Neorealist Mirrors," 287.

12. Jeff Sharlet, "Why Diplomatic Historians May Be the Victims of American Triumphalism," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 24 (September 1999), A19–A20.

13. Leffler, "New Approaches," 193–96.

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