Review of International Studies, Vol. 44, part 2, pp. 236–251. doi:10.1017/S0260210517000432

First published online 11 October 2017

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Taking history seriously in IR: Towards a historicist approach

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Abstract

IR scholars have always invoked history as a valuable resource for understanding the present. However, the question of how should we go about investigating and interpreting the past is rarely asked, let alone answered. While most IR approaches are anchored to the attempt to situate oneself outside history – reading the past in terms of the present or in terms of a hypothetical future – this article strives to redress the kind of historical perspective adopted, if at all, by IR scholars. It does so by advancing a distinctive historicist approach that emphasises the importance of understanding past practices and discourses in their own historical and intellectual contexts. In order to substantiate this claim, the article goes on to critically engage with recent calls to historicise intervention in IR, arguing that a historicist mode of analysis represents a corrective to presentism as well as an alternative route into present-day debates.

Keywords

Historicism; Presentism; Context; Genealogy; Critical Theory; Intervention

Introduction

As International Relations (IR) scholars, the way we approach history can be extremely varied. The kind of historical scholarship that we value is very much a reflex of the way we conceive the relationship between history and theory.[1] Although the status of history and the place of historical research in international theory is a source of considerable contestation,[2] its role in IR has always been peripheral. Subordinated to other disciplinary approaches – mainly sociological and philosophical – that prevail in the study of International Relations, historical approaches have often been instrumentally deployed in support of more or less general theories about the foreign conduct of states or the evolution of an international system. This limited purpose of historical research, serving as a foothold for validating theories, is clearly reflected in IR literature, which has been characterised by the perpetuation of disciplinary myths and presentist readings of the past due to a lack of engagement with historical scholarship and methods.[3]

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[1] Christian Reus-Smit, 'Theory, history and great transformations', *International Theory*, 8:3 (2016), pp. 422–5. See also Joseph MacKay and Christopher David LaRoche, 'The conduct of history in International Relations: Rethinking philosophy of history in IR theory', *International Theory*, 9:2 (2017), pp. 203–36.

[2] See, for example, the Special Issue 'Historicising the Social in International Thought', *Review of International Studies*, 41:4 (2015); and the recent symposium 'Theory, History and the Global Transformation', *International Theory*, 8:3 (2016).

[3] Benjamin de Carvalho, Halvard Leira, and John M. Hobson, 'The Big Bangs of IR: the myths that your teachers still tell you about 1648 and 1919', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 39:3 (2011), pp. 735–58.

Since at least the last couple of decades, however, historically-informed scholarship has gained some traction in international relations and international political theory.[4] Led by scholars working at the intersection of IR, political theory and intellectual history, this burgeoning literature conducts research into the history of international relations and political thought, emphasising the discontinuous and multi-layered surface of history. Scepticism towards teleological historical narratives has been accompanied by mistrust towards grand theory. There is indeed a growing sense in which the activity of theorising in international relations (maybe in the humanities and the social sciences more broadly) loses much of its credibility when based on decontextualised and ahistorical generalisations about the past. The mantra that we increasingly hear is that 'context matters', and indeed it does. While ignoring history altogether leads to straightforward ahistorical accounts of present-day debates and practices, ignorance of the social, political, and intellectual contexts within which discourses and practices unfolded can easily translate into misleading parallelisms between past and present.

To counter the unfortunate tendency to reproduce presentist readings of the past, and contribute to a history of international political thought where the historical takes primacy over the philosophical, in this article I draw the contours of a historicist approach. For historicist I mean the view that social phenomena are different at different points of time in human history, the logical corollary of which is that we should approach the past without assuming continuity with the present. The attempt is to reverse the way history is commonly practiced in IR: rather than dragging the past into the present, we must agree to be dragged into the past. This means, *in primis*, doing away with appeals to principles that lend necessity or unity to history.

In the first two sections of the article I discuss the two major sources of inspiration for this historicist approach: the historical contextualism of the so-called Cambridge School intellectual historians; and the genealogical approach embraced by the late Michel Foucault. Two distinct methodological approaches that can nonetheless be seen as sharing a commitment to historicism as well as a similar critical *ethos*. In order to clarify the salience and the added value of this historicist approach, in the last two sections of the article I engage with some of the recent IR literature that aims to 'historicising intervention'. I discuss in some detail the risks of anachronisms that arise when wanting to study intervention in a broad historical perspective. The recovery of past discourses about what we today call intervention cannot be accurate if we do not at least attempt to distance ourselves from contemporary modes of reasoning and suspend our conceptual vocabulary. A historicist approach assists us in this task by urging us to interpret historical claims within their particular historical and intellectual contexts.

[4] For some examples, see Duncan Bell, 'International Relations: the dawn of a historiographical turn?', *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 3:1 (2001), pp. 115–26; Duncan Bell, 'Political theory and the functions of intellectual history: a response to Emmanuel Navon', *Review of International Studies*, 29:1 (2003), pp. 151–60; Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Edward Keene, *International Political Thought: A Historical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005); Beate Jahn, *Classical Theory in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Ian Hall, 'Power politics and appeasement: Political realism in British international thought, c. 1935–1955', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 8 (2006), pp. 175–6; Evgeny Roshchin, '(Un)natural and contractual international society: a conceptual inquiry', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:2 (2013), pp. 257–79; Lucian M. Ashworth, *A History of International Thought: From the Origins of the Modern State to Academic International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

I. Historicism as a corrective to presentism

Historicism is a notion with both a long history and a contested meaning. We might think of it as a 'struggle-concept' that has been used in very different ways in order to attack and defend a range of positions.[5] Philosophers and historians have variously discussed the nature of this concept, giving form to dramatically different versions of historicism. Talking of a single historicist tradition of thought is clearly problematic, even within a single national context. We only need to think of Germany, where the term, *historismus* first became popular in the 1840s, and came to identify thinkers as distant as Ranke and Hegel.[6] Indeed, historicism has undergirded contrasting perspectives on how to interpret the past. The shared view that historical knowledge is distinctively important in understanding, explaining and evaluating human and social life was not necessarily accompanied by a teleological view of history, a characteristic that Mark Bevir finds in what he calls Victorian 'developmental historicism'.[7] In fact, quite the opposite is true.

Historicism is not synonymous with an approach to history that postulates a secular or religious logic to historical events and human affairs. This is particularly evident when we look at the historicist approach of German historical writers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, who were concerned with developing a method that established 'rules for appraising and judging documents critically, and for expunging from consideration of them whatever folklore, superstition, and mythology might make their validity fictional rather than actual'.[8] Using a historicist approach meant for them adopting a method of treating or evaluating a body of knowledge that tries to interpret texts in their contexts with reference to historical-empirical evidence. From this perspective, historicism is understood as a form of, or an approach to, intellectual history that tends to emphasise the individual and unique aspect of every historical event, discarding a historical frame of reference that necessarily assumes progress. There is indeed no one history of the present, but several histories of the past that can help understand the present. [9] It is on these grounds that the historicist approach advanced in this article rests.

Such an understanding of historicism bears a resemblance to the one advanced by John Hobson and George Lawson with their 'historicist historical sociology', which they define as 'a mode of historical enquiry that recognises the specificity of events within their temporal and spatial contexts and rejects transhistorical categories that render history as exhibiting isomorphic properties'.[10] Yet, while not incompatible with an emphasis on ideational structures, the historicist approach advanced here differs from most sociological and constructivist ways of 'doing history' in IR.[11] Their attention is

[5] Dwight E. Lee and Robert N. Beck, 'The meaning of "historicism"', *The American Historical Review*, 59:3 (1954), p. 570.

[6] Helen P. Liebel, 'The enlightenment and the rise of historicism in German thought', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 4:4 (1971), pp. 377–85.

[7] Mark Bevir, *Historicism and the Human Sciences in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 1–20.

[8] Liebel, 'The enlightenment and the rise of historicism in German thought', p. 361.

[9] In their attempt to map the different philosophies of history at work in IR scholarship, MacKay and LaRoche in 'The conduct of history in International Relations' suggest an increasing tendency to move away from linear, teleological, and continuist views of history, and towards multilinear ones in which history has a plurality of more or less intelligible trajectories.

[10] J. M. Hobson and G. Lawson, 'What is history in International Relations?', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 37:2 (2008), p. 422.

[11] Richard Devetak, 'A rival enlightenment? Critical international theory in historical mode', *International Theory*, 6:3 (2014), pp. 441–7. For a statement of constructivism's approach to history, see Christian Reus-Smit,

more on building a 'historically informed *theory* of international relations' than on understanding the historical 'making' of International Relations theory and practice.[12] This is not to say that constructivists in IR do not engage in significant historical research, but rather that in doing so they privilege theoretical explanation and innovation over historical understanding. Such an approach remains quite vulnerable to charges of presentism, which can take two forms: either the anachronistic application of present-day ideas onto the past; or the anachronistic appropriation of ideas from the past into the present. In both cases it is a form of 'tyranny of the present over the past'. As Patricia Owens recently put it, 'to combine one or other branch of social theory with historical research' may not contribute to 'a meaningful "historical turn" in IR'.[13]

In this sense, constructivist focus on norms as social facts and their emphasis on macro-history is quite problematic. On the one hand – and despite a variety of approaches to the study of the 'norms life cycle'[14] – taking 'norms' as the predominant unit of analysis carries the risk of equating the virtue of a norm to its 'empirical' diffusion.[15] On the other hand, it very often has the effect of overlooking the ambiguities in the process of normative change by obscuring the localised contexts in which the moral value of norms is contested.[16] An understanding of the historically and geographically contingent moral universe within which argumentation and contestation take place is in fact compromised by the scientific pretension of abstracting norms from their social and intellectual reality.[17] By ascribing changes in knowledge to a cluster of 'intellectual interventions' taking place within a variety of discursive battlefields and in specific historical contexts, a historicist approach is, instead, well positioned to shed light on this discursive micro-dimension and the 'minor' (forgotten) dynamics

'Reading history through constructivist eyes', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 37:2 (2008), pp. 395–414. For a study exemplifying the possible synergies between constructivist and contextualist approaches, see Ben Holland, 'Sovereignty as dominium? Reconstructing the constructivist Roman law thesis', *International Studies Quarterly*, 54:2 (2010), pp. 449–80.

[12] Devetak, 'A rival enlightenment?', p. 443.

[13] Patricia Owens, 'Method or madness? Sociolatry in international thought', *Review of International Studies*, 41:4 (2015), p. 651.

[14] See, for example, Acharya's recent call to introduce a 'norm circulation' approach to the study of 'norm life cycle'. Amitav Acharya, 'The responsibility to protect and a theory of norm circulation', in Ramesh Thakur and William Maley (eds), *Theorising the Responsibility to Protect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 59–78.

[15] This is a point that Martin Weber also raises, though in the context of his defence of an intellectual space for critical normative theory in Martin Weber, 'Between "isses" and "oughts": IR constructivism, critical theory, and the challenge of political philosophy', *European Journal of International Relations*, 20:2 (2014), pp. 528–30.

[16] Stephan Engelkamp and Katharina Glaab, 'Writing norms: Constructivist norm research and the politics of ambiguity', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 40:3–4 (2015), p. 2.

[17] Examples of this kind of approach are Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics and political change', *International Organization*, 52:4 (1998), pp. 887–917; Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); and Michael N. Barnett and M. Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). For similar criticisms, see Antje Wiener, 'The dual quality of norms and governance beyond the state: Sociological and normative approaches to "interaction"', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 10:1 (2007), pp. 47–69; Mona L. Krook and Jacqui True, 'Rethinking the life cycles of international norms: The United Nations and the global promotion of gender equality', *European Journal of International Relations*, 18:1 (2012), p. 104; Laura Zanotti, 'Governmentality, ontology, methodology: Re-thinking political agency in the global world', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 38:4 (2013), p. 296; Laura Zanotti, 'Questioning universalism, devising an ethics without foundations: an exploration of International Relations ontologies and epistemologies', *Journal of International Political Theory*, 11:3 (2015), p. 280; Engelkamp and Glaab, 'Writing norms', p. 3.

of normative change. By adopting history as an 'analytical mind-set',[18] a historicist approach tends to emphasise the distinctiveness of social phenomena in history. It prompts us to think historically and to accept that many aspects of the past are significantly different from those of our own time. Not least, the social 'norms', the discourses and the ideas that characterise different times and places. Of course, there are constructivist scholars in IR that draw less explicitly on the 'norms life-cycle' literature and adopt a more careful approach that allows for nuanced accounts of the dynamics of normative change.[19] Their predilection for comparative or case study macro-histories, however, sits uneasily with Christian Reus-Smit's claim that 'constructivist history is essentially "Skinnerian" in nature'.[20] A historicist approach needs to take seriously the methodological precepts developed since the late 1960s by the intellectual historians of the so-called 'Cambridge School', particularly J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner.[21] Their commitment to contextual research entails an attempt to interpret the intellectual intervention that the author was aiming at: an attempt to explain what she or he was trying to do in relation to other authors, ideas, events, and debates of the time.[22] Quentin Skinner insists on the Wittgensteinian maxim that 'words are also deeds' and goes on to argue that 'even the most abstract works of political theory are never above the battle; they are always part of the battle itself'.[23] Thus, history is understood not as a linear and coherent development of knowledge and events, but rather as a 'battlefield' of discourses where intellectual interventions are analysed on their own terms. Obviously, this is not to say that we should aspire to an infallible interpretation and a complete understanding of history.

Rather than foreshadowing the possibility of discovering an author's 'definite intention' in writing a text – as some of his critics want him to[24] – Skinner is essentially concerned with providing a plausible interpretation of the 'illocutionary' force of the author's words; [25] that is, what authors were trying to say and *do* with their writings. [26] Skinner's point is 'that the recovery of the historical meaning of any given text is a necessary condition for understanding it, and that this process can never be achieved simply by studying the text itself'.[27] Central to this process is a sound knowledge of the intellectual debates and political struggles our authors were engaged in, the conceptual vocabulary and discourses available to them, as well as the social context of the time. The question of how to determine and define a relevant context has traditionally been a source of division among

[18] Xavier Guillaume, 'Historicising the international', *E-International Relations* (2013).

[19] Andrew Phillips and Jason C. Sharman, 'Explaining durable diversity in international systems: State, company, and empire in the Indian Ocean', *International Studies Quarterly*, 59:3 (2015), pp. 436–48; Andrew Phillips, *War, Religion and Empire: The Transformation of International Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[20] Reus-Smit, 'Reading history through constructivist eyes', p. 395.

[21] J. G. A. Pocock, *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[22] Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in history', *History and Theory*, 8:1 (1969), pp. 47–52.

[23] Quentin Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. xv. On the advantages of an 'empirical intellectual history', see Ian Hunter, 'The history of theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 33:1 (2006), p. 75; Ian Hunter, 'The history of philosophy and the persona of the philosopher', *Modern Intellectual History*, 4:3 (2007), pp. 571–600.

[24] Bhikhu Parekh and R. N. Berki, 'The history of political ideas: a critique of Quentin Skinner's methodology', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 34 (1973), p. 175.

[25] Skinner, *Visions of Politics I*, pp. 98–9; Devetak, 'A rival enlightenment?', p. 444.

[26] Skinner, *Visions of Politics I*, p. 122.

[27] Quentin Skinner, 'Some problems in the analysis of political thought and action', in James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 104.

contextualists and a target of critics.[28] Despite Skinner's early insistence that the linguistic context should be the ultimate framework of reference, it is now widely recognised that the definition of what counts as relevant context ought to be elastic and include elements beyond the mere argumentative context and the political language of the time.[29] Thus, the context in which the interpretation of past texts and ideas take place are neither pre-given nor self-evident. Yet, as one of the pioneers of the Cambridge School, John Dunn, recognised early on: 'The problem of interpretation is always the problem of closing the context. What closes the context in actuality is the intention (and, much more broadly, the experiences) of the speaker.'[30]

If the Cambridge School represents the most systematic and authoritative expression of contextual methods, we might argue with Duncan Bell that 'not all contextualists are Skinnerian'.[31] Differences notwithstanding, what contextualists share is a common commitment to historicism; an approach whose main upshot is to provide a corrective to anachronism and presentism.[32] One of the problematic effects of presentism is well described by what Pierre Bourdieu called the 'scholastic point of view'.[33] Flattening the past with our present concerns results in the favouring of the universal over the particular or, better, the 'unconscious universalization of the particular case'.[34] As Bourdieu put it: 'when we unthinkingly put to work our most ordinary modes of thinking, we inflict upon our object a fundamental adulteration, which can go all the way to pure and simple *destruction* and that may well remain unnoticed'.[35] Rather than necessarily resulting in our object of study being 'destroyed' or allotted to historical oblivion, we will more likely face problems of decontextualised interpretations – where thinkers are expected to ask and answer questions that they were not actually addressing – and of partiality – where their arguments are selectively brought to the fore to 'serve as *post hoc* legitimating devices' for the construction of presentist narratives.[36]

Yet, there is no denying that as scholars we are 'situated agents', as Bevir would have it.[37] We are inevitably located in the present and our research is in one way or another motivated by the fact that we live in the present. This is what Naomi Oreskes calls 'motivational presentism',[38] and it is important to stress that the historicist approach that I advance here does not have the pretension to overcome this form of presentism. Rather, it aims to minimise the distorting effects of presentism on

[28] Mark Bevir, 'The contextual approach', *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011a), pp. 11–24.
[29] David Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 19–32.
[30] John Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', *Philosophy*, 43:164 (1968), pp. 98–9.
[31] Bell, 'Political theory and the functions of intellectual history', p. 153.
[32] For an argument about Skinner's unacknowledged debts to historicism, see Joseph V. Femia, 'An historicist critique of "revisionist" methods for studying the history of ideas', in Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context*, pp. 156–75.
[33] Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 127–40.
[34] Ibid., p. 136.
[35] Ibid., p. 134.
[36] Duncan Bell, 'Political theory and the functions of intellectual history: a response to Emmanuel Navon', *Review of International Studies*, 29:1 (2003), p. 154 (quote). See also Conal Condren, 'Historiographical myth, discipline, and contextual distortion', *History of European Ideas*, 40:1 (2014).
[37] Mark Bevir, 'The logic of the history of ideas then and now', *Intellectual History Review*, 21:1 (2011), p. 111.
[38] Naomi Oreskes talks of various 'presentisms', among which 'motivational presentism'. Naomi Oreskes, 'Why I am a presentist', *Science in Context*, 26:4 (2013), p. 596. For a more cautious endorsement of this position, see Condren, 'Historiographical myth, discipline, and contextual distortion', pp. 37–8.

our interpretation of the past by allowing us 'to uncover the often neglected riches of our intellectual heritage and display them once more to view'.[39] The fact that we cannot escape being situated in a particular moment in time does not compel us to apply present concepts on the past; it does not oblige us to interpret the past through present frames and judge it according to present values. As the intellectual historian Conal Condren puts it: 'there is an easy slippage here from some aspect of the present providing an initial stimulus to inquiry to its becoming a criterion for the selection of evidence and the imposition of narrative structure'.[40]

II. A historicist critical *ethos*

In a self-reflective piece about his recent scholarly endeavours and the practice of the intellectual historian, David Armitage (a pupil of Skinner's) suggests that 'an aversion to charges of presentism has often disabled us from admitting our reasons for studying past ideas and arguments at all'.[41] When taken seriously, this warning should stimulate us to be less hesitant and more outspoken about our 'motivational presentism'. From this standpoint, scholars have some room for manoeuvre in choosing the extent to which they want to tie their historical material to the present and draw the strands together for the reader. This personal choice depends essentially on the scope of one's own research and is often informed by different understandings of what it means to be a 'critical' scholar, a label not many are prepared to let go of.[42] Yet, from a historicist perspective, it is central that critique should grow out of historical research, where the philosophical does not take primacy over the historical and our historical narratives are not tailored to fit preordained arguments. In this section, I suggest that both contextual and genealogical methods are historicist modes of analysis that display such a commitment. While carefully acknowledging the significant distance between Skinner and Foucault, I argue that they share a similar critical *ethos* regarding the role that they envisaged as being the purview of the scholar: a facilitator for self-emancipation rather than an oracle or minister of emancipation.

No doubt, many are the grounds on which Foucault's historicism departs from Skinner's; not least the degree of contingency and instability that the latter attributed to social reality as well as to subjectivity.[43] Differences notwithstanding, however, their critical posture did not envisage an emancipatory praxeology addressing the question of 'what we should do' in general terms, but rather a commitment to a critical *ethos* of 'detachment of oneself from oneself'. In this regard, Skinner famously suggested that the aim of the scholar is simply to 'provide their readers with information relevant to the making of judgements about their current values and beliefs, and then leave them to ruminate'.[44] Gaining some distance from our present modes of reasoning allows – in Skinner's words – for 'a greater degree of understanding, and thereby a larger tolerance, for elements of

[39] Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 118–19.
[40] Condren, 'Historiographical myth, discipline, and contextual distortion', p. 38.
[41] David Armitage, 'Modern international thought: Problems and prospects', *History of European Ideas*, 41:1 (2014), p. 118. See also the critical exchange on Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* in K. Hutchings, J. Bartelson, E. Keene, L. Ypi, H. M. Kinsella, and D. Armitage, 'Foundations of modern international theory', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 13:4 (2014), pp. 387–418.
[42] Debates about the 'critical' purposes of scholarly research and its relation to ethical reasoning are indeed very lively in the discipline of IR. For instance, Richard M. Price et al., 'Special Forum on moral limit and possibility in world politics', *International Theory*, 4:3 (2012), pp. 430–4.
[43] Ryan Walter, 'Reconciling Foucault and Skinner on the state: the primacy of politics?', *History of the Human Sciences*, 21:3 (2008), pp. 94–114.
[44] Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism*, p. 118.

cultural diversity'.[45] Perhaps surprisingly for most, Michel Foucault's views on this are not too dissimilar from Skinner's. Here is how he puts it:

> To be at the same time an academic and an intellectual is to try to engage a type of knowledge and analysis that is taught and received in the university in a way so as to modify not only the thought of others but one's own as well. … The role of the intellectual is not to tell others what they must do [or to] mold the political will of others; it is, through the analyses that he does in his own field, to re-examine evidence and assumptions, to shake up habitual ways of working and thinking, to dissipate conventional familiarities, to re-evaluate rules and institutions … .[46]

In short, although they traditionally advocated different techniques for historical research, both Skinner and Foucault believed that there is some 'critical' value in the plea to elevate the empirical above the theoretical, since describing can have an explanatory value in itself without empirics having to be fitted into an overarching theory that commands their relevance.[47]

The convergence of their critical *ethoi* is further marked by Skinner's recent outspoken endorsement of a genealogical approach and his commitment towards contributing to present-day debates.[48] Despite ignoring the 'late Foucault' and considering him only in relation to his early 'structuralist' works, Skinner's approach seems to have more in common with Foucault's genealogical approach than the British historian might be aware of.[49] Indeed, genealogy is understood by both as a way of recovering historical routes we did not pursue, thus recapturing intellectual resources to confront the present with an enriched theoretical imagination.[50] A genealogy is not an attempt to write a general or comprehensive history; more modestly, it is an attempt to write a critical history that produces one or more fine-grained snapshots that might allow us to look at present discourses and practices from an unconventional perspective. In providing an explanatory narrative, a genealogy tries to avoid teleology – the idea of a logic being at work through history – and reveals greater attentiveness to context;[51] it tends to 'dig' into historical discourses, where 'origins' are never metaphysical but

[45] Skinner, *Visions of Politics I*, p. 125.

[46] Michel Foucault, 'The concern for truth', in Sylvère Lotringer (ed.), *Foucault Live (Interviews, 1966–84)* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), pp. 303–6. In recent years Foucault's works have given rise to lively discussions in the field of International Relations as to his 'emancipatory potential'. See the Special Issue 'Michel Foucault: New Directions in Theorising World Politics', *Global Society*, 23:4 (2009). Also, the Forums: 'Assessing the Impact of Foucault on International Relations', *International Political Sociology*, 4:2 (2010); and 'Foucault and International Political Sociology', *International Political Sociology*, 2:3 (2008).

[47] Andrew W. Neal, 'Empiricism without positivism: King Lear and critical security studies', in M. B. Salter and C. E. Mutlu (eds), *Research Methods in Critical Security Studies: An Introduction* (New York Routledge, 2013), pp. 42–5; Richard Bourke and Raymond Geuss, *Political Judgement: Essays for John Dunn* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 1–26.

[48] See, for instance, Quentin Skinner, 'The sovereign state: a genealogy', in Hent Kalmo and Quentin Skinner (eds), *Sovereignty in Fragments: The Past, Present and Future of a Contested Concept* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 26–46.

[49] Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism*, p. 122, fn. 19. For Foucault's structuralist work *par excellence*, see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973). On the problems connected with Foucault's structuralist period, see Hunter, 'The history of theory'.

[50] For an exchange on Skinner's 'genealogical turn', see Melissa Lane, 'Doing our own thinking for ourselves: On Quentin Skinner's genealogical turn', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 73:1 (2012), pp. 71–80; Quentin Skinner, 'On the liberty of the Ancients and the Moderns: a reply to my critics', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 73:1 (2012), pp. 127–46.

[51] Michel Foucault, *Bisogna Difendere la Societa* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2008), pp. 18–19.

always contingent.[52] In this respect, Foucault once noted that a genealogy is a 'gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary [that] depends on a vast accumulation of source material'.[53]

Thus, like Cambridge School (and other) contextualists, the genealogist is strongly opposed to inscribing historical variance in teleological or 'continuist' narratives. Both reject the idea that universal objects exist and dispute the argument that there are any constants in human history.[54] History is not a linear and coherent development of knowledge and events governed by an underlying logic, but rather, a plurality of more or less intelligible trajectories.[55] The rejection of a demiurgic role for the 'critical' scholar does not condemn the latter – and the discipline of IR as a whole – to practical irrelevance. On the contrary, the role of the 'critical' scholar as a facilitator for self-emancipation is premised on the idea that starting from history in a reconstructive fashion helps us detect the historical contingency and the social embeddedness of our political and moral values more broadly. Instead of imposing a transhistorical standard of global justice on the past and embracing a 'transcendental approach to justice',[56] a historicist approach strives to situate historical claims within their discursive battlefield, turning normative and philosophical contest into an object of historical inquiry itself.[57] In doing so, it guards us from presentism, while warding off fears of antiquarianism.[58]

In order to enable a better understanding of the specificity of the historicist approach proposed in this article, I now turn to discussing it with reference to the recent literature that explicitly attempts to 'historicise intervention'.[59] This literature rightly suggests that debates around intervention are not disjoined from the past and can be more accurately grasped when we take their historical antecedents into consideration. The contributors of the 2013 Special Issue on 'Intervention and the Ordering of the Modern World' agree on the general points that intervention is a 'social practice' and that there is a need to rethink its meaning beyond the context of a sovereign state system within which it has been confined.[60] Yet, there are also some contrasting views on what intervention exactly means and *how* we should go about historicising it. The adoption of a historicist approach, I suggest, can positively contribute towards redressing the decontextualised and partial interpretations of past discourses that so often give rise to the anachronistic application of present-day ideas onto the past or the anachronistic appropriation of ideas from the past into the present. In short, I argue that the broad intellectual endeavour of historicising intervention would benefit from the incorporation

[52] Srdjan Vucetic, 'Genealogy as a research tool in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 37:3 (2011), pp. 1300–303.

[53] Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, genealogy, history', in Paul Rabinow and Paul Nikolas Rose (eds), *The Essential Foucault* (New York: The New Press, 2003), p. 351.

[54] Jens Bartelson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 54–65.

[55] This view of history seems to sit astride four of the categories elaborated by MacKay and LaRoche, 'The conduct of history in International Relations': nonlinear, multilinear, familiar, and unfamiliar.

[56] Amartya Sen, 'What do we want from a theory of justice?', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 103:5 (2006), p. 216.

[57] Hunter, 'The history of philosophy and the persona of the philosopher'. For a discussion of the limits of historical approaches that presuppose a transcendent rationality and the advantages of an ethics of empiricism, see Knud Haakonssen, 'The philosophy of a persona', *History of European Ideas*, 40:1 (2013), pp. 116–21.

[58] For an early formulation of the criticism of antiquarianism directed to Cambridge School contextualism, see Charles Tarlton, 'Historicity, meaning and revisionism in the study of political thought', *History and Theory*, 12 (1973), pp. 307–28.

[59] See the Special Issue on 'Intervention and the Ordering of the Modern World', *Review of International Studies*, 39:5 (2013). For an early attempt to historicise intervention, see Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*.

[60] John Macmillan, 'Intervention and the ordering of the modern world', *Review of International Studies*, 39:5 (2013), pp. 1039–56.

of a historicist perspective that can minimise the distortive effects of presentism. In Section III, I start by illustrating two examples of presentist readings of J. S. Mill's and Jeremy Bentham's thoughts on intervention. I then move on to discuss the problems associated with traditional IR notions of intervention, before putting forward – in Section IV – the advantages of a context-dependent understanding of intervention as an alternative to both 'pure' historical nominalism and 'catch-all' definitions of intervention.

III. A few words on historicising intervention: From a historical to a historicist approach

Examples of the distortive effects of presentism abound. A recent one can be found in Michael W. Doyle's reading of John Stuart Mill on the question of intervention.[61] Here, the author grounds his interpretation of the British philosopher's thoughts exclusively on one piece of writing ('A Few Words on Non-Intervention'). Doyle ignores the fact that Mill produced several other statements on intervention besides 'A Few Words on Non-Intervention', which was written between 5 October and 14 November 1859 in response to the complex developments of the Italian struggle for independence.[62] As Georgios Varouxakis points out in his excellent study of Mill's international thought, the way Mill uses the words 'rightful' or 'moral', 'prudent', and 'heroism' in that text corresponds to the different branches of the 'art of life' – that is, 'morality'; 'prudence or policy'; and 'aesthetic' – that Mill outlines in his 'A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive'.[63] Oblivious to these distinctions, Doyle goes on to misrepresent Mill's mode of reasoning on intervention and, specifically, the logic underlying his consideration of exceptional circumstances.

Thus, Doyle provides not only a selective and partial representation of Mill's arguments about intervention, but also a decontextualised reading of the thinker's ideas. In this way, Mill can be said to be asking exactly the same questions we are asking today about the legitimacy of intervention, facing the same moral dilemmas and using the same conceptual vocabulary as his counterparts some one hundred and fifty years later. It is evident that Doyle's engagement with Mill is directed by the attempt to prescribe what he argues would be 'better standards for intervention and non-intervention' today. As he tells the reader in the introduction: 'enough of his [Mill's] argument survives to warrant a firm rejection of strict noninterventionism and to suggest new standards for prudent and limited intervention, including a guarded defense of the new doctrine of Responsibility to Protect'.[64] This is indeed a striking example of how historical understanding is subjugated to normative and presentist theorising.

Another, more subtle, example of the distortive effects of presentism can be found in Peter Niesen's study of Jeremy Bentham's and Immanuel Kant's thoughts on law and ethics in foreign policy.[65] This time the problem resides in the superimposition of contemporary categories on the past. Despite an otherwise commendable knowledge of Bentham's works, here the author argues that Bentham's

[61] Michael W. Doyle, *The Question of Intervention: John Stuart Mill and the Responsibility to Protect* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).
[62] Georgios Varouxakis, *Liberty Abroad: J. S. Mill on International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 86–100.
[63] Ibid., pp. 80–2.
[64] Doyle, *The Question of Intervention*, p. xii.
[65] Peter Niesen, 'The "West divided"? Bentham and Kant on law and ethics in foreign policy', in David Chandler and Volker Heins (eds), *Rethinking Ethical Foreign Policy: Pitfalls, Possibilities and Paradoxes* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 93–115.

proactive support for military intervention in Tripoli can be read as 'one of the earliest cases of advocacy for humanitarian intervention with the avowed aim of liberal regime change'.[66] Indeed, the idea that 'Bentham's plan concerns a pre-emptive humanitarian intervention' is not only a limited reading that overlooks the important details of Bentham's argumentation, but one that uses humanitarianism – an unavailable category at Bentham's time – to describe his thinking and associate it with contemporary positions.[67] Seeing Bentham as a supporter of humanitarian intervention would entail, at the very least, ignoring his persistent critique of natural jurisprudence and his high consideration of a politics of non-intervention.[68]

Clearly, then, historical approaches are not synonymous with historicist approaches.[69] Although the intellectual endeavour to historicise intervention is a laudable one, attempts to understand historical discourses on intervention have tended to be deaf to the distinctiveness of the past. They have failed to delve into historical discourses by suspending our contemporary categories and our modes of reasoning. To the extent that past political thought and texts are misrepresented in the more or less conscious academic practice of presentism, these approaches provide us with superficial and distorted readings of texts that lose sight of the kinds of intellectual interventions that they represented when they were originally written. Past thinkers are assumed to have faced questions about intervention by adopting normative stances and modes of reasoning that are readily intelligible to us, without the need for further investigation. This is unfortunate because it jeopardises from the outset the possibility of uncovering historical intellectual resources that could shed a different light on contemporary debates and contribute towards an easing of normative conflict on the legitimacy of interventions today. In other words, by reading historical texts and discourses anachronistically, attempts to historicise intervention fail to recover alternative ways of thinking about the legitimacy of intervention. Obstructing our view of discourses, concepts, and ideas available in specific historical and intellectual contexts leaves us with little hope of retaining a critical *ethos* in our endeavour to historicise intervention.

While much attention has been paid to tracing the history of the practice of intervention in sociological terms, less effort has been devoted to retrieving the ways the legitimacy of this practice has been construed, discussed, and contested historically.[70] Even when this has been the case, inquiry into historical discourses on intervention have resulted in the projection of our contemporary normative mindset and conceptual vocabularies onto history.[71] This very problem is evident in the ways our own conceptualisation of intervention is often superimposed on the past. Traditional IR

[66] Ibid., p. 111.

[67] Ibid. For another anachronistic reading of Bentham, this time as a supporter – for supposedly humanitarian reasons – of British military intervention in the Greek War of Independence (1821–32), see Gary J. Bass, *Freedom's Battle: The Origins of Humanitarian Intervention* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009).

[68] Stephen Conway, 'Bentham on peace and war', *Utilitas*, 1:1 (1989), pp. 82–101.

[69] George Lawson, 'The eternal divide? History and International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 18:2 (2012), pp. 207–9.

[70] This is evident also in the Special Issue, 'Interventionism as Practice', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 9:4 (2015). Specifically, see the introductory piece, Christian Olsson, 'Interventionism as practice: On "ordinary transgressions" and their routinization', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 9:4 (2015), pp. 425–41. For a recent statement of the 'practice turn' in IR and an introduction to sociological practice theory, see Emmanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, 'International practices', *International Theory*, 3:1 (2011), pp. 1–36.

[71] For a recent collection of essays that 'take seriously the "contextualist" challenge' while thinking that 'a close reading of classic texts can enhance our understanding of intervention', see Stefano Recchia and Jennifer M. Welsh, *Just and Unjust Military Intervention: European Thinkers from Vitoria to Mill* (Cambridge: Cambridge

notions of intervention provide a clear example of this where they define interventions as military operations aimed at changing the 'political authority structure' of the target state.[72] Narrowing the range of social practices that we can rightfully call interventions to a clearly defined sample of cases has its obvious advantages; however, this appears to be a doubtful strategy when looking to understand intervention in a historical perspective. The restriction that such a definition operates is problematic because it neglects the different historical and intellectual context in which practices and discourses of intervention took place, assuming a strong historical continuity in the nature of the social practice of intervention.

In what sounded like an alternative strategy, Martha Finnemore, promised to explicitly avoid any definition of intervention when she stated that: 'Rather than looking at an event and asking, Is it intervention?', she explained, 'I looked at activities that the participants describe as intervention and ask inductively, What is it?'.[73] Unfortunately, Finnemore betrayed this methodological commitment to historical nominalism when the preoccupation with not rendering 'the category [of intervention] analytically meaningless' led her to delineate her understanding of interventions as 'exceptional … compromises of sovereignty … that require armed force'.[74] In fact, while being a highly appealing methodological approach, a 'pure' historical nominalism risks being ineffective for the purpose of historicising intervention discourses. Challenges to the latter approach arise not only in the case where the term we are interested in (that is, intervention) was not available in the contexts we are scrutinising – in which case historical nominalism is clearly untenable – but also where the term 'intervention' had been used, its meaning might well have been significantly different to the one we attribute to it today. In both cases, it is virtually impossible to completely do away with our own understanding of what intervention is.

Insofar as 'pure' historical nominalism is not a viable option, the historicist approach advanced here leans towards a context-dependent understanding of intervention. This is an understanding that strives to suspend our own assumptions about what intervention is in order to retrieve its meaning from historical material. Far from neglecting the fact that our research may start from a general and (to a certain extent) personal understanding of intervention, what a historicist approach suggests is that the meaning of intervention should stay open to revision because it ought to be reflective of the political discourse of the time. Key to such an approach is the attempt to render the international political discourse of our chosen historical and social contexts accessible to us (and to our readers). This requires us to take seriously the claim that many of IR's conventional assumptions, concepts, and modes of reasoning are historical artefacts. Indeed, 'the international' – the first and foremost object of disciplinary analysis in IR – is a historical artefact, and not 'a pre-given or brute object that exists independently of human thought and activity'.[75] 'The international' – as 'the global' – exist in

University Press, 2013). The extent to which the 12 contributors succeed in keeping this promise varies, of course.

[72] James N. Rosenau, 'Intervention as a scientific concept', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 13:2 (1969), p. 161. For definitions along these lines, see R. J. Vincent, *Nonintervention and International Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 8; Recchia and Welsh, *Just and Unjust Military Intervention*, p. 5., fn. 15.

[73] Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*, p. 10.

[74] Ibid., pp. 9–10.

[75] Devetak, 'A rival enlightenment?', pp. 445–6. See also Darshan Vigneswaran and Joel Quirk, 'Past masters and modern inventions: Intellectual history as critical theory', *International Relations*, 24:2 (2010), pp. 107–31. Michel de Certeau argued that 'the international' is a form of 'historiography', a way of writing history. Michel de Certeau, *L'Ecriture de l'Histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

conjunction with our intellectual capacity to make them thinkable, analysable and, finally, actionable.[76] It is only with the disintegration of the European medieval order, the religious and civil wars and the consequent emergence of the sovereign state as the dominant mode of civil association that the notions of 'state system' and that of 'the international' emerged as a separate and 'governable' zone of political life in the decades straddling the year 1800.[77]

IV. Intervention in context: Bringing the imperial back in

In the attempt to ground our understanding of intervention in history, Edward Keene has recently distinguished between a premodern and a modern practice of intervention.[78] Despite his concession that 'there were plenty of examples of what we would unquestionably call 'interventions' in the early modern world', Keene has argued that we cannot talk of the existence of a 'modern practice of intervention' before the second half of the eighteenth century, when an international hierarchy based on capabilities (army, population, and wealth) – a grading of powers – started overshadowing the old hierarchy of precedences.[79] In this residual hierarchy of medieval Europe the right to intervene was not separated from the broader right to use force, which was importantly conferred on all actors independently of their status and on the condition that there was a just cause for war. Keene goes on to tell us that only later, when states started to be conceived of as corporate persons and sovereign equals, rather than as dynastic patrimonies of rulers, could a hierarchy of powers emerge and, with it, the modern practice of intervention.

Thus, in line with Keene's argument about a qualitative shift from a 'premodern' to a 'modern' conception of intervention, we can reasonably look at the *sattelzeit* as the historical period when the meaning of intervention starts to be tailored to the sovereign state and understood as a (geo)political act conducted by states as collective actors (or corporate persons). It is in fact during the so-called *sattelzeit* (1750s–1830s) that the state system underwent what we could call an 'ontological crystallization', when the self-reflectivity of the state inaugurated by the literature on reason of state in the seventeenth century starts to be conceived as being part of a system of states.[80] While in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was common to use the expression 'foreign affairs', 'foreign

[76] On the importance of treating 'the international' as a political space and not a reified and de-historicised ontology, see also William Walters, *Critical Issues in Global Politics: Governmentality: Critical Encounters* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2012), pp. 100–2; Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (London: Sage, 2010), pp. 87, 238; Guillaume, 'Historicising the international'. On a seminal account of critical geopolitics, see Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

[77] Richard Devetak, 'Historiographical foundations of modern international thought: Histories of the European states-system from Florence to Göttingen', *History of European Ideas*, 41:1 (2014b), p. 4. See also Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (London: Penguin, 2013), pp. 14–23.

[78] Edward Keene, 'International hierarchy and the origins of the modern practice of intervention', *Review of International Studies*, 39:5 (2013), pp. 1077–9.

[79] Ibid., p. 1078. A similar position is upheld in George Lawson and Luca Tardelli, 'The past, present, and future of intervention', *Review of International Studies*, 39:5 (2013), p. 1236.

[80] On the importance of this historical period of transformation in Europe (that is, the *sattelzeit*), see Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985). John Pocock followed Koselleck in defining this period as a 'threshold period' for modernity. J. G. A. Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands: Essays in British History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Lately, various studies are building on Kosellecks's original argument and adding historical evidence of the emergence of 'the international'. Among them, Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought*, p. 30; Devetak, 'Historiographical foundations of modern international thought', pp. 1–4.

policy' as a phrase appeared only in the 1804, suggesting more of a regularised and planned inter-state interaction within European states.[81] Yet, however convincing and historically-informed Keene's argument is, it relies (even if implicitly) upon a very specific understanding of intervention; that is, a coercive social practice, distinct from the use of force more broadly, and carried out by one or more sovereign states *against another sovereign state* as a result of a selectively attributed right of intervention.

The identification of practices of intervention solely with those concerning sovereign-sovereign relations is unsuited to the aim of historicising contemporary discourses of intervention because it *a priori* cuts out the imperial dimension from the analysis, thus failing to grasp the social reality within which states shaped their (geo)political conduct. Insofar as it was a foundational period for the European system of states, the *sattelziet* also coincided with what has been called the 'first age of global imperialism' (1760–1830) – the first truly global epoch of European imperialism that was then strengthened and extended by Victorian imperialism.[82] If the late nineteenth century was to become the heyday of modern forms of liberal internationalism,[83] the *sattelziet* saw European states consolidating different sets of rules and practices of intervention both among themselves and within their empires. Despite the fact that imperialism and internationalism – rather than realism and idealism or liberalism – are the two categories that shaped the discipline of IR in the late nineteenth century,[84] it has primarily been scholars outside the discipline that have investigated the ideational contexts in which European imperialism unfolded.[85] Delving into the long history of European imperialism, these authors have highlighted how its legitimacy was underpinned by (and questioned through) a variety of forms of reasoning and argument. Unfortunately, this imperial dimension has too often been overlooked in the endeavour to historicise intervention, even by authors like Keene who did a great deal to debunk the myth of the 'anarchical society' of equal and independent states.[86]

By being vocal about the necessity to understand intervention beyond what he calls 'the sovereignty frame', Christian Reus-Smit has recently made an important contribution towards addressing this lacuna in IR.[87] He contests the assumption that we can talk of intervention only in cases of violations of a sovereign state's political and legal authority, adding, however, that 'the general insight that interventions are violations of jurisdiction is a crucial one'.[88] There is great merit in Reus-Smit's argument that we should not consider sovereign states' jurisdiction and the transgression thereof as

[81] Halvard Leira, 'Taking Foucault beyond Foucault: Inter-state governmentality in early modern Europe', *Global Society*, 23:4 (2009), p. 489, fn. 75.

[82] Christopher A. Bayly, 'The first age of global imperialism, c. 1760–1830', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 26 (1998), pp. 28–47. For an interesting collection of works on Victorian imperialism, see Duncan Bell, *Victorian Visions of Global Order: Empire and International Relations in Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[83] Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

[84] David Long and Brian C. Schmidt, *Imperialism and Internationalism in the Discipline of International Relations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

[85] See, for example, David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[86] Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society*.

[87] Christian Reus-Smit, 'The concept of intervention', *Review of International Studies*, 39:5 (2013), pp. 1057–76.

[88] Ibid., p. 1060.

the only relevant realm of differentiation for referring to intervention. This would indeed be an unwarranted closure for the purposes of the intellectual endeavour to historicise intervention. Yet, there is an important way in which I depart from Reus-Smit's approach: more than a context-dependent conception of intervention, his conceptualisation is a deductively imposed 'working definition' of intervention. He wants this to be a transhistorical analytical category that can 'travel' among different historical international orders: from the medieval heteronomous order of overlapping jurisdictions, through the modern bifurcated order of sovereignty inside Europe and empire abroad, to the post-1945 contemporary international order of universal sovereignty.[89]

This sets us up for a presentist narrative that sees intervention in the past through the lens of our own time. While Reus-Smit's argument that 'interventionary ideas and practices can exist with or without the signature terminology'[90] is compatible with a historicist approach, the risk with a deductively-imposed definition of intervention designed for macro-historical comparisons is to neglect that the lines of differentiation on which the practice of intervention acquires meaning are (and have historically been) manifold, and that they shift together with the dominant legitimising discourses of intervention. Rather than adhering to a predetermined definition of intervention, a historicist approach prompts us to check and re-evaluate the reliability of our definition against our chosen intellectual and historical contexts. Such a context-dependent understanding of intervention should indeed be embraced as an alternative to both 'pure' historical nominalism and 'catch-all' definitions of intervention.

Ultimately, the recent calls to historicise intervention are a welcome development in IR, but this intellectual endeavour should not yield to the siren song of presentism. In the attempt to strike a balance between presentism and antiquarianism, I have proposed here a historicist approach that puts the contextual interpretation of intervention discourses into the foreground. This also entails recognising the importance of context-dependent understandings of what intervention is, rather than taking it as an ahistorical concept divorced from the context in which it arose. Works that turn to history and inquire into intervention discourses in empirical and descriptive terms are important not only because contemporary debates around intervention can be more accurately grasped when we consider their historical antecedents, but also because such reconstructive intellectual endeavours promise to be a resource for our normative thinking. The rationale for using a historicist approach when historicising intervention is not solely to provide a more accurate historical account of the changing meanings of intervention and the different ways it has been legitimised, but also to provide a new and fresh perspective on present debates.

Conclusion

By introducing the reader to the historicist approach illustrated, this article contributes to the ongoing debates about the role of history and historical scholarship within IR. I start by identifying a tendency among IR scholars to adopt historical approaches that reproduce presentist readings of the past. I then go on to discuss the problem of presentism, illustrating how a historicist approach can act as a corrective to the anachronistic application of present-day ideas onto the past as well as to the anachronistic appropriation of ideas from the past into the present. Thus, I emphasise the importance of understanding past practices and discourses in their own historical and intellectual contexts. I do so with particular reference to the IR literature that aims to historicising intervention,

[89] Ibid., pp. 1060–2.
[90] Ibid., p. 1059.

highlighting the potential pitfalls of such an intellectual endeavour when disjoined from a historicist approach. Through a close engagement with this literature I was able to illustrate some of the problems that haunt historical scholarship in IR more generally, which, instead of investigating the different nature of social phenomena and discourses at different points of time, approaches the past assuming continuity with the present.

Yet, as Condren provocatively puts it, 'tidy history is apt to be fanciful history'.[91] The IR theorist, instead, commonly inscribes (if not completely dismisses) historical variance in teleological narratives about the moralisation of international politics or in 'continuist' ones of various kinds, where the arguments and ideas of past authors are selectively represented either as early 'signs' and 'seeds' of the progressive unfolding of a cosmopolitan horizon or as the persistence of a transcendent rationality reflected in permanent features of politics, capital, or human nature. Rather than providing us with a comprehensive history of the past or a principle-oriented developmental history, the aim of a historicist approach is to produce a history that critically inquiries into our moral and political ideas; hence, renouncing the idea of a supra-historical standpoint, be it finalist or presentist, from which to interpret the present.

The aversion to external standpoints from which to pass moral judgement as well as the attentiveness to contextually-oriented understandings of past practices and discourses are the distinctive traits of a historicist analytical strategy. Where its immediate value is to act as a corrective to presentism, a historicist approach has a critical scope insofar as it brings to the table novel (or forgotten) ideas for our normative thinking. Building on the critical *ethos* envisaged in Skinner's and Foucault's late works, I have reclaimed a 'critical' role for the scholar who acts as a facilitator of self-emancipation rather than an oracle of emancipation. The former is the humble critical posture of a scholar who appreciates the pluralistic nature of historical progression and rejects the idea of a logic or a transcendent rationality being at work through history – a scholar who sees an intrinsic critical value in historical understanding and refuses to subjugate it to theoretical elegance and parsimony.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks the editors of *Review of International Studies* and the three anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback. Special thanks go to Richard Devetak and Ryan Walter, to the colleagues of the IR History and Theory Group at the University of Queensland, as well as to the participants in the 2017 SGRI Conference in Trento.

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[91] Conal Condren, *Argument and Authority in Early Modern England: The Presupposition of Oaths and Offices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 350.