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# History, Action and Identity: Revisiting the 'Second' Great Debate and Assessing its Importance for Social Theory

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This article raises the issue about the nature of knowledge in practical matters. Traditionally this question has been answered by pointing to 'theory-building' and to field independent epistemological criteria that are supposed to provide the knowledge warrants for the assertions made within a theoretical framework. In this context universality, i.e. generality and trans-historical reliability of the 'data', are particularly powerful criteria that establish the 'truth' of theoretical propositions through 'tests' and thus contribute to cumulative 'knowledge'. But this ideal of 'theoretical' knowledge significantly misunderstands both the type of knowledge we need when we make practical choices and that of 'history' in constituting us as agents. In using Bull's argument in the second debate as a foil, and in revisiting also the controversies concerning the democratic peace and the role of macro-historical studies I first elaborate on the nature of the 'historicity' and situatedness of all practical knowledge. In a second step, I attempt to clarify how the knowledge of the past relates to practical choices in that 'history' is not simply a storehouse of fixed data, but a product of memory, which in turn is deeply involved in our constructions of identity and of the political projects we pursue. In a third step I adumbrate the criteria for knowledge generation that are more appropriate when we face practical problems.

KEY WORDS ♦ agency ♦ historicity and identity ♦ practical knowledge

## Introduction

Assessing progress in theory-building in International Relations involves two issues. First, what are the criteria for appraising theory development and,

second, what are the factors driving this development? Is it mainly the changing political *problematique*, or the debates within the discipline, or the organization of the field as an academic discipline that explains theory development?

Each of these factors seems to provide a plausible account that can marshal some empirical support. According to the hypothesis of policy-driven development it was no accident that the study of IR emancipated itself in the inter-war and post-World War II period when revolutionary changes brought the European state system to a close and ushered in a global system of unprecedented heterogeneity. Presently we can see again that a changed political agenda and new policy problems, such as terrorism, make it appear that most of what we know about deterrence and security are rather quaint reminders of a time gone by, rather than part of a cumulative disciplinary knowledge. Furthermore, depending on how we count the various debates in the field, at least since the 'third' debate, we have to admit that the discussion has been driven more by epistemological and methodological issues than by politics (Lapid, 1989). Finally, more recently, students of the disciplinary development have pointed to the importance of national and social settings for the development of the field (Joergensen, 2000; Friedrichs, 2004).

In sorting out these conflicting interpretations we have, therefore, to take leave of one of our most cherished beliefs, i.e. that 'progress' in theorizing, is the result of a quasi-automatic process of self-correction, whereby conjectures are either refuted or corroborated (for this position see Popper, 1965). Here historians and philosophers of science in the last generation have also fundamentally changed the conception of science. The emphasis has decisively shifted from simple 'tests' and the discovery of universal laws, to a concept of science as a *practice*. Instead of logic and the logical positivist speculation about the nature of 'true' statements which were part of, for example, Popper's 'Third World' (Popper, 1972), we have come to realize that knowledge production has an important practical and historical dimension that needs to be reflected upon. Here the work of Fuller (1991), Bourdieu (2000) or Knorr-Cetina (1981, 1999), who all focus on the process of knowledge production instead of on 'ontology', or field-independent epistemological categories, is suggestive (see in this context also the seminal contribution of Thies, 2002).

However, my claim is still somewhat wider in that I argue that the understanding of 'politics' requires a historical awareness that is *sui generis*. Politics is inherently *practical* since it deals with doing the right thing at the right time in view of the particular historical circumstances. Thinking coherently about such problems requires different skills than, for example, those extolled in the most successful contemporary methodological primer

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(King et al., 1994), since neither the subsumption under a universal law nor the logic of inference from samples to the general population is here at issue.

Similarly, the traditional epistemological criteria of 'rigour' and 'parsimony' are in this perspective powerfully counteracted by the requirements of completeness and coherence ('followability' is the criterion proposed by Gallie (1968) for evaluating the plausibility of a story line). As in law, the crucial question is whether or not anything relevant has been left out. This leads to a different conception of 'truth' which serves as a warrant for our knowledge claims. Truth is no longer beholden to the ideal that our concepts match 'the world' out there — precisely because in the social sciences some of the most important concepts are constitutive (and are used recursively) of the social world rather than simply mirroring or describing it — but it is also no longer tied to notions of universal (trans-historical) validity. However, despite the accusations that this stance amounts to 'relativism' it is clear that the notion that 'anything goes' is ruled out. Instead, warrants are provided or defeated by the inter-subjective defensibility of the assertions made in our arguments.

While the case for caution in accepting uncritically parsimony as a criterion has been ably made by Dessler (1993), the plea for completeness and proper contexts was part of Bull's advocacy for a 'classical' approach in the second debate. To that extent I argue that Dessler's criticism has not gone far enough and needs to be complemented by some of Bull's insights. However, I do not want to enter a full-fledged discussion of the second debate — precisely because I believe that some of Bull's (1966) central points need a much more careful restatement — I shall use Bull's arguments as a foil in order to demonstrate the importance of historical reflection for an adequate understanding of politics. The appropriate knowledge in this case is then not simply that of a science or even an applied science, but the combination of a strong diagnostic element (knowing 'what') with the 'knowing how' (rather than knowing only 'why').

I want to argue, therefore, that these substantive reasons will by necessity point us to history. However, the engagement with the historical will obviously be quite different from encountering or distilling some 'lessons' from history, or from testing our theories by historical 'facts'. As to the first, given that under conditions of rapid change, the past can no longer provide us with exemplars, which we can apply to the case at hand. Thus the function of a historical reflection can neither be the collection of 'lessons' (on the change in our historical understanding of the past see the fundamental discussion by Koselleck, 1985) of history, nor consist in the

knowledge of what 'really' happened. Rather, I claim that it is through historical reflection that we become aware of the 'dialectic of choice' in which from the present the past is recollected and joined with the future by means of a political 'project'. To that extent the model of 'rational action' is expanded, as it is no longer limited to the present preferences (whose genesis remains, however, exogenous) but the later are linked to future expectations. Instead, the agents' valuations are now systematically tied to individual and collective identities, as well as to future 'projects' (utopias) which, in turn, are not restricted to probabilities by which one assesses the occurrence of events.

Precisely because we know that things could have been different, the more we deepen our understanding of the past, we begin to sense the opportunities forgone and thereby become aware of our own potential as agents. Of course, this does not mean that everything is now possible only because most constraining 'structures' are now 'deconstructed' in this reflective process. On the contrary, historical awareness clearly indicates that not everything is possible, as disagreements are rife, collective action problems abound, dilemmas are real and institutions are sticky. Historical reflection does not provide us with a warrant to engage in fantasies of omnipotence solely because the 'necessities' to be confronted turn out to be mostly man-made. Such a reflection is, nevertheless, the precondition for a proper appreciation of action and agency.

These might seem rather heady claims and in order to make good on them I want to take the following argumentative steps. In the next section I want to review briefly Bull's arguments to show the problematic of using history as a tool in theory-building. In particular, I shall concern myself with the problems of measurement, judgement and the alleged role of generalizations or laws in the social sciences. To illustrate the problematic 'use' of history, I draw on two further debates in the discipline, namely the democratic peace argument and the place of macro-sociology in the field. While in both cases history is largely used as a storehouse for data which allegedly allow us to test theories, some of the recent discussions concerning historical facts have brought to the fore the problem of their 'emplotment', i.e. the realization that historical 'facts' are always part of a story. To that extent history is not simply 'there' (like a collection of facts or things), but is a product of 're-collection', i.e. memory, the subject of part three. This argument about memory then sets the stage, in the fourth section, for a discussion of the role of individual and collective memory in a theory of action. A brief summary characterizing the type of knowledge applicable to practical problems concludes the article.

## *The Need for Historical Reflection vs Reducing history to a storehouse of 'Data'*

I begin with Bull's critique of the obsession with measurement in the social sciences which in his view misdiagnoses the problems of conceptualization and the way in which warranted knowledge is created. Here the role of judgement and the question of the historical nature of the social world become the relevant issues. Both points have important implications for theory-building and for the *kind of* theory we need in order to address questions of *praxis*. But despite the fact that Bull's argument seems essentially right, some of its steps were badly stated and ought to be clarified. For example, it is hardly convincing to argue against the search for universal laws and then say that the 'models' of IR 'could just as well have been expressed as an empirical 'generalization' — quite aside from the fact that laws and generalizations work rather differently (Bull, 1966: 370). Similarly, to maintain that 'rigor and precision' to which the scientific approach aspires can be achieved 'wholly within the classical approach' (see his point six in Bull, 1966: 375) seems rather off. After all, this argument contradicts two other major points of his — that the subject matter of politics might require different standards from those provided by logical calculi, and that by choosing an erroneous methodological ideal one is likely to end up in an empty formalism and with an impoverished research agenda (points 1 and 7).

Furthermore, Bull claims that if the proponents of the scientific approach have led us to insights, it was because they had left the narrow confines of their own methodological criteria. Again, to the extent that the failure to match one's own standard is a common failing among researchers of all colours, Bull's plea for a classical approach requires then a more principled argument. It would have to go beyond merely indicting the 'fetishistic'(!) character of measurement and argue, instead, that the *notion of field-independent scientific criteria* — endorsed by the unity of science position — is in itself not a useful 'regulative idea'. Moreover, a more principled restatement of Bull's concerns about the failure of theory to appreciate the challenge posed by problems of praxis has to be extended in order to question the belief in the 'objectivity' of the 'scientific approach', *as propagated in mainstream social science*, since it relies on several meta-physical assumptions. This requires further explanation.

The most important of these assumptions is the idea that 'social kinds' do not differ in any significant way from 'natural kinds'.[1] But if we take seriously Weber's (1974) claim that in the social sciences it is not simple observable elements (natural kinds) but *values* that determine the operations of our concepts, Bull's argument about the need for judgement attains a special

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weight. What counts as an instance of, for example, war or democracy, is neither answerable by a closer look at the phenomena, nor is it solved by strict operationalization and inter-coder reliability. Equally problematic is a second assumption, i.e. that only trans-historically valid generalizations provide insights and warranted knowledge. As Paul Diesing once correctly pointed out, generalizations, about US voting behaviour, for example, 'can be valid even though they apply only between 1948 and 1972 and only to Americans. Truth does not have to be timeless. Logical empiricists have a derogatory name for such changing truths: relativism, *but such truths are real, while the absolute fully axiomized truth is imaginary*' (Diesing, 1992: 91 emphasis added).

A third metaphysical assumption concerning 'objectivity' becomes visible here. It is beholden to a rather suspect Platonic ontology that something truly 'is' only when it does not change. The whole Western tradition has always distinguished 'true being' from different forms of being. The former is eternal while the latter is the realm of growth and decay. On the basis of modern physics we might, however, rather think about 'things' and 'objects' not as fixed entities, but as temporary stabilizations of various processes. In that case a totally different ontology emerges, as time and change are not identified with decay or lack of truth. Instead, change is the normal, i.e. true, condition. Thus, in the case of 'social kinds', getting the context for these 'stabilizations' right, both conceptually and historically — a problem that cannot be answered by building, for example,. rigorous models, as Bull correctly suggests — is then more important than focusing on two or three unchanging variables.

Given these difficulties that seem to open the floodgates of 'relativism', several gambits are available to the adherents of 'universality', which depend, however, on the elimination of history as a proper concern. One is the idea that historical laws, explaining transitions from one epoch or period to another, can capture even transformative changes. The other involves the opposite assumption, i.e. the existence of some trans-historical structures that work themselves out, irrespective of the changes 'on the surface'.

However, a moment's reflection shows the problematic nature of both gambits (quite aside from the incompatibility of the claims). The first relies on a philosophy of history (for a scathing criticism of this idea see Popper, 1961), in which the philosopher plays now the role of God who looks upon the 'developments' from an absolute point beyond time. For him everything is contemporaneous and history can only be conceptualized as some type of unfolding, be it of the Hegelian spirit, or of Marx's productive forces, or democracy as in the 'end of history' (Fukuyama, 1992). It was one of the merits of Popper's analysis to have debunked the myth of such historical

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laws. Even if three or four events are causally related, there is no way to construct out of this chain a historical law.

The other gambit, as we have seen, is to radically de-emphasize problems of change by focusing on the existence of allegedly trans-historical systemic structures (for a much more heuristically fruitful notion of a system allowing for great historical variation see Buzan and Little, 2000). In this fashion even transformative change, such as the one we encountered in the demise of the Soviet Empire, becomes a mere 'data point' that is hardly of significance (for a useful collection of essays on this point see Lebow and Risse-Kappen, 1995). Having defined the 'system' in such a way that nothing but the emergence of an empire would count as a transformative change, the actual investigation into the changing patterns of politics can then safely be sequestered to 'confirmatory' research. However, as the discussion about 'unipolarity' vs. 'hierarchy' suggests, such a research programme is seriously flawed. Obviously the two versions of systems differ in whether or not the principle of legitimacy has changed, rather than in a change in the distribution of capabilities. While the preponderant state in a unipolar system might have as much influence as an imperial centre, part of the rules defining the international game differ significantly. In an empire the centre can give orders, in a unipolar system such orders are illegitimate and will, in all likelihood, engender resistance.

To the extent that the foregoing points are valid, the development of an objectivist conceptualization of a social system without any recourse to the ideas and values the actors themselves hold seems futile indeed. Precisely because social reality is not simply 'out there' but is made by the actors, the concepts we use are part of a vocabulary that is deeply imbricated with our political projects. Nowhere does this become clearer than in the 'empirical' evidence presented in support of the theory of democratic peace. Behind the efforts of operationalization, measurement and coding lie not only language but a political project that informs our conceptual apparatus. Drawing the lines will depend more on judgement in the light of our values than on operationalization and the development of 'over-all' scores. Attributing a case to a type requires, therefore, (contestable) *judgements* rather than abstraction and the type of inferences familiar from statistics and quantitative methods.

For example, what are we to do with 'illiberal democracies' (see the discussion by Collier and Levitsky, 1997), that is, political systems that might provide for contested elections and changes in government, but not for an effective civil rights regime? But if such additions stand for relevant dimensions, could the development of an 'over-all score' not perhaps deal with these problems? Unfortunately, the idea of an over-all score does not

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really solve the problem, as the following discussion shows. In operationalizing the democratic peace argument, for instance, a polity-score could be calculated by subtracting an 'autocracy' index from that of a 'democracy index', which then yields a number that supposedly tells us how democratic a country is. But, as David Spiro (Spiro, 1994: 56) has pointed out, by using this data set and the operationalization suggested by Maoz and Russett — for autocracy and democracy France is then not 'democratic' after 1981, but El Salvador is, and Belgium was not a democracy until 1956! (Maoz and Russett, 1993). Here obviously some implicitly or explicitly held values concerning the importance and weight of the several dimensions of democracy play a role, a problem that cannot be reduced to one of increasing coding reliability, or to one of looking harder at the facts.

Similarly, the comparison between the measures constructed by the Finnish social scientist Tatu Vanhanen (1990) for democracy (operationalizing the concept along the lines of Dahl's definition) and that of Doyle (Doyle, 1983, 1986) shows, that on the 'Finnish' score the US ranks consistently low, far behind West European political systems. Vanhanen's research emphasizes most heavily participation and the competitiveness of elections among different parties and the supremacy of parliament (for a fuller discussion of these problems see Davis, 2005). In Doyle's treatment, on the other hand, the US scores always highest historically as well as at present. It does so despite the fact that historically the franchise was limited, slavery was part of the picture and party competition virtually non-existent in large parts of the country, not to speak of apparently widespread alienation, indicated by the low voter turnout. Thus in the American scientific discourse the liberal norms are usually those that correspond with the *ongoing political project* of the US and it is this yardstick that is then applied to other countries.

In other words, countries resembling the US are held to share also the same political project, be it liberal peace, consumer sovereignty or whatever, even if the causal chain accounting for the outcome usually remains rather murky (see the controversy between Slaughter, 1995, 2000 and Alvarez, 2001). As Ido Oren suggested:

> Polities have numerous objective dimensions by which they can be measured. The dimensions captured by the current empirical measures of democracy came to be selected through a subtle historical process whereby objective dimensions on which America resembled its enemies were eliminated, whereas those on which America differed the most from its enemies became privileged. Thus the coding rules defining democracy are better understood as a time-bound product of America's historical circumstances than as the timeless exogenous force that they are presumed to be. (Oren, 1995: 152)

The upshot of this discussion is that data banks are not simple storage

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places for our unadulterated facts, but they are part of our political understandings and projects. *It is through historical reflection and not through generalization* that the genesis of such data becomes visible, that the role of judgement is uncovered, and that the criteria for counting a phenomenon as an instantiation of a certain concept become explicit. To that extent it is also not surprising that authors in IR who have advocated 'process tracing' and single case studies for theory development, such as Alexander George and Andrew Bennett (2005), have been most sensitive to these issues. However, the methodological implications of this alternative are frequently not taken seriously. Instead, true to the 'logic of inference' either single cases are held to have little theoretical power, as, for example, some realists argued in the case of the demise of the Soviet Empire (Lebow and Risse-Kappen, 1995: ix). Alternatively, it is sometimes suggested that the theoretical shortcoming of single cases should be amended by increasing the number of observations within it (although such a move violates the statistical requirement of the independence of cases).

Similar controversies emerge from the renewed interest in macro-historical studies in sociology (see the controversy between Mann, Gold-thorpe, Mouzelis and Hart, 1994) and political science (Lustick, 1996). While the discussion among the sociologists created more heat than light, Ian Lustick correctly identified the central point of this controversy — expressed in the language of normal social science it concerns 'selection bias'. Thus in examining the 'empirical' basis of such macro-historical works as Barrington Moore's *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966) or Theda Skocpol's study on *States and Social Revolutions* (1979), Lustick points out that both authors had used, as their factual basis, histories by authors who implicitly or explicitly shared their own theoretical biases. Moore — in order to make good on his claim that the English Civil War was actually a bourgeois revolution — had for example to show that the bourgeoisie emerged as an important social force by the second quarter of the 17th century. His proof was provided by the historian Tawney's somewhat problematic class analysis that had amalgamated not only the burghers and the gentry into one revolutionary movement, but that also had postulated the emergence of an entrepreneurial 'proto-capitalist class'. These facts were, however, forcefully debunked by Hexter (1961) and other historians studying the same era. In other words, Moore relied on Tawney and Campbell for the facts, without any critical appreciation that these facts were the result of interpretations and of theoretical dispositions similar to his own, and thus could not provide a neutral set of data by which the theoretical propositions could be established.

Somewhat counter-intuitively we have to conclude that the primary problem for macro-historical work is, therefore, not the difficulty of getting

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enough information about the past. As Lustick suggests, 'The more daunting question is how to choose sources or data without permitting correspondence between the categories and implicit theoretical postulates used in the chosen sources to ensure positive answers to the questions being asked about the data' (Lustick, 1996: 608). Of course, historians have long been familiar with this difficulty. In a seminal article the eminent historian Carl Becker (see the discussion of Becker in Barnes, 1927) tried a long time ago to explode the notion of hard 'historical facts' that are directly accessible to us.

For example, the historical fact that Caesar crossed the Rubicon existed not as a simple description of the physical acts involved in crossing a river, but only in virtue of its relations to other facts and its *emplotment in a narrative*, putting these things in perspective. Given the unavailability of simple facts, the hope of arriving at the truth via generalizations or more 'data' seems slim indeed. Historians have therefore developed various ways of weighing the evidence by subjecting sources and 'facts' to criticism, relying on counterfactual arguments, 'triangulation' and procedures for 'process tracing'.

I have used the two examples above to suggest that the recursivity problem arises particularly clearly in the social sciences, because the actors' understanding influences the world. Therefore, the causal arrows run from our (or the agent's) understanding *to* the world and not *from* 'the world' to our understanding or theory. This point explodes the notion that all true explanations have to be cast in terms of efficient causes, and that objectively given things are mirrored by our concepts, as the scientific approach suggested. I also argue that this leads us straight back to Bull, who suggested an exposure to history in order to deal with the substantive issues arising in the world of *praxis*.

The above discussion concerning the emplotment of historical facts and the nature of historical data has also tried to drive home the point that although history is past and seems therefore objective, fixed, and thus presumably provides a secure source of knowledge, actual historical reflection shows that matters are quite different — history is malleable because it is always *remembered* and part of a story, which, in turn, is usually confronted not only by counterarguments concerning this or that 'fact' but also by different narratives 'contesting' the conventional or hegemonic version of things passed. This is often forgotten even by authors who engage in research and adduce historical data in support of their theories. Often such historically enriched research represents little more than a 'confirmatory' engagement with history, precisely because only supporting evidence is presented and the crucially important element of the criticism of 'sources' often remains underdeveloped.

As recent debates show, dyed in the wool realists are wont to find the workings of anarchy everywhere (Fischer, 1992; for a criticism of the abuse of history in general by neo-realists see Schroeder, 1994; a critique of Fischer's treatment of medieval sources can be found in Hall and Kratochwil, 1993). Even the more sophisticated treatment of the historical record by Andrew Moravcsik, suggesting, for example, that de Gaulle's foreign policy goals were dictated by commercial rather than geo-strategic interests (Moravcsik, 1998), relies, however, on a questionable reading of two sources rather than on some unproblematic 'hard' primary source, as he claims (for an incisive criticism of Moravcsik's treatment of sources see Lieshout et al., 2004; for an earlier debate see also the symposium in the *Journal of Cold War Studies* (2000: 2(3)) with contributions by Hoffmann, Keeler, Milward, Gillingham, Vanke, Trachtenberg, Moravcsik). Finally, what is often forgotten is that 'history' always remembered from *a certain situation in the present*, for which things past now have relevance. Thus 're-collecting' the past means putting it in a frame which bestows importance on the actions and events by connecting the past through the present with our personal and political projects. In this reflection we establish our identity as agents and societies and understand ourselves as the 'same' despite all the changes. In this sense 'history' is the encounter with the 'self' rather than simply a storehouse of data, or an agglomeration of examples or presumptive lessons.

## *Memory, Identity and Action*

Below I explore the link between historical reflection, agency and notions of the individual and collective self. For if we can show how agency depends on historical reflection, this evidence will cast further doubt on the coherence of an absolute, objective scientific vantage point for problems of praxis, as Bull suggested. In order to build my case I want to approach the problem by relying on Nietzsche's reflections on historicity, before coming back to Bull's 'classical' approach.

It was Nietzsche (1954) who probably most strongly emphasized the role of historical reflection in the construction of the self. He reserved special criticism for viewing the past as fixed — a misconception of history that he labelled 'antiquarian'. In addition, by seeing history as a product of memory, Nietzsche not only realized that every recollection also presupposes the 'ability to forget' (Nietzsche, 1954: 281) and that any 'history' exists in the tension between recalling and forgetting, he also highlighted the fact that the past is deeply involved in constructing the individual as an agent. In order to be able to act, agents have to first recover their history.

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Furthermore, history, defined as a 're-collection' of all those things *worth remembering*, provides in itself the antidote (Nietzsche, 1954: 281) against the poison of an assumed necessity, of the logic of systems, of the 'blind forces of the real' (Nietzsche, 1954: 265) and the hopelessness that comes from the invention of a tradition which makes out of us only 'epigones' of a glorious but unreachable past. We can see now from this vantage point why new beginnings stand in such a close relationship to the past, as exemplified by the various 'renaissances'. From Ancient Sumer[2] to Egypt[3], to the Italian Renaissance, or even to the French or the Russian Revolution[4]. A new link to the past was intrinsic to the new beginnings that were sought.

Another important thing we notice in Nietzsche — irrespective of whether or not we agree with his philosophy of life — is that, seen from this perspective, the process of individuation is not simply a biological process but is mediated by communication with others and by the sharing of certain collective memories with the group. As all societies are 'imagined communities', to use Anderson's felicitous phrase (Anderson, 1991), the individual memory is built up by participation in communicative processes. Two processes are important in this context. One concerns the shared rules and practices we need for both daily interactions and the inevitable conflicts that arise. The other concerns the common recollections that help us understand *who* we are.

The *first* kind of processes (dealing with conflicts and interactions) has usually been treated as a problem of order and justice. Norms governing this process allow us to interact even in the face of disappointments, as the most important function of norms is their capacity for 'prospective ordering' as well as their counterfactual validity. Contrary to the realist explanations of social order — that is, the supposed need for an enforcer who metes out *ex post* punishment — enforcement can always only be a residual strategy, as no society could exist if it had to rely solely on the command of the sovereign and his sanctions. Here Hobbes's point was much subtler as his analysis is based on the generative force of expectations.

The *second* type of process involves, however, the diachronic link of connecting the past through the present to the future via our individual and common projects. Who we are is significantly shaped by where we think we come from. This process has therefore to do with identities and collective memories that allow us to function as a person and a group and that make 'society' an ongoing and trans-generational concern of all members.

Furthermore, these two ways of connecting the individual and the group are much more intrinsically linked than they appear at first. After all, what has to be done and what we are obliged to do is often directly the result of *particular recollections* that powerfully shape us precisely because *they are not universalizable* or can claim general applicability. For example, obedience is

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due to the traditional ruler, because he is the legitimate son of the previous ruler and, thus, only a flaw in the genealogy would exculpate the nobles and vassals if they failed to obey. Similarly, historical events may have particular meaning and obligatory force for a society. 'Remember the Maine', 'remember the Boyne' (the battle of 1690 between Protestants and Catholics in Ulster), 'remember St Vitus' day' (1389, battle of Kosovo), 'remember Auschwitz', 'never again must Masada fall', etc. — all those exhortations refer to recollections of particular relevance to a given group, but they are at the same time powerful sources of obligations.

Obviously the dead are of particular importance in this context. Traditional society has dealt with this specific obligation in terms of *piety* (i.e. what is due to one's ancestors)[5] (Virgil, 1990) and *fama* (kudos), where others may participate although they might have no particular personal link to the deceased. How *political* this cult of the dead had become after the move from a tribal society to the classical polis can nicely be gathered from Pericles' famous Eulogy for the dead (Thucydides, 1972, Bk II, paras 34–46). At first, somewhat strangely for us, we notice that it is the *city* and not the fallen that are the object of the encomium. But Pericles followed here only the very spirit of the Athenian legislation that had made honouring the dead a *public* rather than a family or clan obligation (Loriaux, 1986). While the family was allowed to keep the fallen for some days, both burial and public display were now the task of the city, thereby powerfully reinforcing the notion that loyalty was owed to the community at large, rather than to the clan or tribe.

These examples make several points. *One* is the malleability of the past as it is created by memory through a recording[6] (and forgetting) of the events one considers (un-)important. As the individual re-writes continuously his/her biography in which events and decisions take on different meanings — even relegating some of them to oblivion — so collective memories, recorded or not, show similar plasticity. Of course, with the invention of writing, those memories which have been discarded remain somewhere and can be 're-collected' again and become sometimes in the future again part of the collective remembrance.

The best example for this phenomenon is the Masada incident that played virtually no role in Jewish collective life during the nearly 2000 years of the Diaspora. As originally recorded by Josephus Flavius (1970) it was a story highly critical of the various groups of zealots who had revolted against the Romans. They had succeeded in seizing the fortress near the Dead Sea and finally committed collective suicide after the Romans had breached the walls. Josephus blamed the zealots[7] for ending the last vestiges of Jewish political life since the Romans laid waste the land and dispersed the entire Jewish population thereafter. But with the experience of the Holocaust, with

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Zionism becoming a political force, and with the creation of a beleaguered state in the 1940s, Masada took on an entirely new meaning. What was now remembered was the uncompromising sacrifice for independence and a particular way of life rather than the political failure of the former state. Something that had been forgotten was 're-collected' — even though from quite a different angle, as suggested by the political situation of the period — and became part of the new collective memory.

The *second* point is that individual and collective memories differ in some important respects but not those usually considered. Usually we assume that the individual as the 'un-ecumbered' self, rooted in the notion of pure reflexivity, is the proper beginning for theoretical reflection. Indeed, Descartes took this as the *fundamentum inconcussum*. Society and all other collective notions are later additions as they are based on experience and aggregation. However, we always start out as 'encumbered selves', as members of a concrete society, in a specific time and with particular obligations. It is only through a long process of differentiation that we acquire the abstract form of the individual or the modern person and with it, the 'view from nowhere'. This Archimedean point characterizes not only our apprehension of the world — since it is constitutive of scientific objectivity — it is also supposed to provide the criteria for assessing our moral commitments. The categorical imperative establishing the criteria of moral autonomy is then the last step in this process in which generalizability becomes the most important requirement. Now all obligations resulting from a shared way of life, such as special duties to our family, children and fellow-countrymen, have to be justified as the ethos itself no longer suffices.[8] As in the case of science, morality as a discipline also seems to require such an absolute vantage point.

It was not only Hegel and the later communitarians who objected to such a construal of ethical reflection. Even Locke (and later Hume) — by no means enemies of moral or scientific enlightenment — recognized that this conceptual move might not be as progressive or unproblematic as it at first appears. Different from the pure Cartesian *cogito*, Locke sees that the actual person is the result of acting, recollecting and forgetting. Consciousness, the timeless certainty of self-reflexivity, cannot provide that foundation, as it is subject to the same processes of emergence and decay as all other human sense impressions. Thus neither the 'clear and distinct ideas', nor the ego emerging from radical doubt, can sustain the weight placed upon them in construing identity and agency.

> The memory in some men 'tis true, is very tenacious, even to a miracle; but yet there seems to be a constant decay of all our ideas, even those which are struck deepest, and in minds most retentive . . . Thus the ideas . . . of our youth, often die before us: and our minds represent to us those tombs, to which we

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> are approaching; where though the brass and marble remain, yet inscriptions
> are effaced by time. (Locke, 1975: 151f.)

Despite the tenaciousness of memory, the identity of a person does not exist in the material substratum, even though we are dealing with the 'embodied self'. Rather it is a unity imposed on the events and actions, which lets us understand ourselves as the same person, despite all the obvious changes and all the various roles we play in our lives. Locke uses here the metaphor of the 'owner' of one's own actions in order to drive home this fact. He contrasts it sharply with the 'unity of substance' such as the body, as a materialist interpretation would suggest.

> That with which the consciousness of this present thinking can join it self, makes the same person, and is one self with it, and nothings else; and so attributes to it self, and owns all the actions of that thing, as its own, as far as that consciousness reaches and no farther . . . .
>
> In this personal identity is founded all the right and Justice of reward and punishment, happiness and misery which every one is concerned for himself, not mattering what becomes of any substance.
>
> This may show us wherein personal identity consists, not in the identity of substance, but as I have said, in the identity of consciousness. (Locke, 1975: 341ff.)

Even if we are not entirely convinced by this 'proof', one thing has become clear — identity is richly textured by all types of conceptual links to notions of responsibility and agency, all of which cannot be reduced to 'pointing' to some incontrovertible fact (for the social character of individual memories see Halbwachs, 1992). Instead what counts as a 'self' joins subjective elements and imputations of outside observers, with those self-definitions of the individual in question. Nevertheless, the difference between personal (or individual) identity and collective identity is that the former has normally — and here pragmatic criteria are of obvious importance as the quote above suggests — as a reference the 'embodied self', while the latter is purely a social construct.

From these follows as a *third* point — that it is easier to 'forget' one's collective identity than the personal one since in the former case life can go on and need not result in the same pathological problems that are frequently associated with the loss of a personal identity. However, as the above considerations also showed, we ought to be careful in thinking that the former is real while the other is a simple figment of the imagination. Collective memories are real and not simple aggregates of individual memories. As in the case of language, we cannot infer from the fact that since only individual speakers can make utterances, language as such must be

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conceived as an aggregation of individual utterances rather than as a collective phenomenon.

*Fourth*, it seems also to follow that the present infatuation with simultaneous 'multiple identities' is a problematic notion. It confuses the notion of 'role' with that of identity, and it commits the fallacy that if something is not fixed, it has to be arbitrary and therefore changeable at will. If someone experiences his or her personal past merely as a sequence of events, s/he will experience life as largely meaningless, s/he will not be able to learn, but is likely to get stuck in (destructive) routines. For avoiding such a fate s/he will have to 'work through' the past — to use the Freudian vocabulary — in order to become again an autonomous actor in its full meaning. Usually such an alienation from one's own past and such a de-centred stance is the result of trauma, which therapy tries to overcome by constructing an alternative historical narrative. True, the individual might decide to change part of his or her identity by leaving home, converting to a new creed or getting 'naturalized' somewhere else. But these are usually exacting processes, more akin to learning a new language than to becoming for example a member of a club, or making a choice between apples or oranges.

*Fifth*, since emotions play such a crucial role in remembering and forgetting (*vide* the trauma mentioned above), special rites and ceremonies are powerful means for mobilizing them and for enabling us to 're-collect'. These rites play a particularly important part in cultures that are not dependent on writing for the preservation of memory (see in this context the discussion of the *tepe* ritual among the Osages in Assmann, 2000: 23ff.). The *hieros gamos*, the yearly ritual of the marriage between heaven and earth, existing in many societies, provides the best example. The periodic 'reliving' of the original creation by re-enacting the cosmological myths is for non-literate societies of utmost importance for the maintenance of order.

In societies in which memory is largely transmitted by texts, coherence is no longer created solely by actual presence and the re-living through rites, but mainly by the canonization of certain texts. This results not only in 'closure' of what belongs to the tradition and what is apocryphal, but also in the 'purification' of the texts themselves, expunging from them what seems foreign or accidental. However, even in cultures whose memory has been transformed by writing, memorial days — when rites and ceremonies call attention to the 'commonality' of the public in an emotionally significant way — are not simply supplanted, but remain part and parcel of the cultural heritage.

The implication of the above discussion is that those who forget their history are not only condemned to repeat their mistakes as Santayana pointed out. The problem is even more serious since those who cannot recall

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the past from the ever-changing problems of the present and connect it meaningfully to a future are impaired in their agency and therefore prone to misunderstand the issues and choices that have to be made. While history cannot be the 'teacher' of all things practical, the critical reflection on our historicity is an indispensable precondition for grasping our predicament as agents.

## Conclusion

This article began with a critical question of how to evaluate progress in theory building. Instead of postulating a priori epistemological criteria I began the discussion with a 'historical' turn, approaching the problem via a history of the field. I did this for two reasons. One, reconstructing the past of a field is an important corrective to aprioristic notions of science and epistemology, as Thomas Kuhn (Kuhn, 1970) and many historians of science have shown. Two, given that the subject matter of politics is 'praxis', the question of what type of knowledge is appropriate for it is prejudged if one assumes that it had to be 'scientific' and that the criteria can be formulated in a field-independent fashion, as the epistemological monism of the unity of science (logical positivism) suggests.

I tried to show the difficulties of that position by first emphasizing the practical aspects of all knowledge production that do not fit the 'theoretical' mould. Here disciplinary histories are particularly important. Second, through this historical approach I was able to highlight the eminently practical nature of knowledge production. In a third step, using Bull as my foil, I tried to show that a certain type of theory-building, which attempts to 'test' theories with multi-variable historical data, fundamentally misunderstands the nature of historical data, for these data consist not in brute facts but are always emplotted and thus part of larger structures of meaning. 'History' is not simply 'there' but is largely a product of memory. What is considered worth remembering is, therefore, constituted by our value-attachments and interests, as Weber already remarked.

Furthermore, if history is produced by memory, as I argued, then it is always viewed from a particular *vantage point of the present*. It is this present problem that informs the selection of what is considered worth remembering. To that extent historical reflection is not some collection of interesting facts one could do without, but is intrinsic to our notions of agency and identity. By approaching history not in terms of the fixity of the past, but through the modality of remembering, individuals and collectivities can transcend the confinements imposed by seemingly autonomously operating systems, and find new ways of mastering their destiny.

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If agency depends on the appropriation of the historical world rather than on the development of an absolute vantage point, then Bull's classical approach provides an important corrective to the absolutist claims of science. It points to the variability of the social world that results from its artificial nature (there are no natural kinds[9]) and from the importance of the practical interest guiding our inquiry. Both factors interact with each other and have important implications for orienting actual research and for the criteria by which we try to assess the results. One emphasizes the 'situatedness' of political problems, the other the specific duties practical political problems impose upon actors. Both problems deserve some cursory treatment hinting at the special characteristic of the 'knowledge' appropriate for *praxis.*

The first problem raises the question of what is a 'case' and how we should treat them for analytical purposes. Here two different types of 'case' treatment are discernible. One is the *population/analytical* approach, the other the *historical case* study. There is no doubt that the traditional epistemological canon favours the population/analytic approach over the single case, as only the former allegedly can provide knowledge warrants according to the generalizability criterion and the canons of statistical inference. Consequently, if there are not enough cases around the researchers are encouraged to increase their observations. While the latter advice might violate some fundamental requirements for inference (independence of cases) other similarly exacting requirements need also to be taken into account. Aside from clear separability of the cases themselves, the properties these cases exhibit must have trans-case meanings, be unchanging over the observational span, and identify *ex ante* all the variables that can be used in explaining changes. If there is a 'plot' it means the 'plotting' i.e. the connecting of all the dots in the variable space.

The single (historical) case study, on the other hand, focuses right from the beginning on the issue of delimiting the case by providing a narrative 'plot' and examining its coherence and 'followability' critically. Here getting the context right and making judgement calls as to the important dimensions that develop throughout the observation is the actual puzzle. The attributes of the case take their meaning then largely from the 'case context', *and not from the values of the variables* themselves, as Ragin has pointed out (Ragin, 2000: ch. 3). Fuzzy boundaries are assumed for any 'historical individual' (case), so not all variables can be identified *ex ante* and the issue is the explanation of 'case transformation' rather than the reduction or transformation of the problem to an issue of different mixes of attributes. As Andrew Abbot suggests:

> The case/narrative approach to explanation thus differs from the population/

analytical one in important ways. It ignores variables (in its language 'type of events') when they aren't narratively important . . . Rather than assuming universal or constant relevance, it explains only 'what needs to be explained' and lets the rest slide along in background. This selective attention goes along with an emphasis on contingency. Things happen because of constellation of factors, not because of a few fundamental effects acting independently. And the roving focus of the case/narrative approach has another distinctive advantage over the population/analytic approach. It need make no assumption that all causes lie on the same analytical level (as in standard sociological models). Tiny events (assassinations) can have a big effect. (Abbott, 1992: 68)

Thus judgement and quick recognition (reasoning by analogy rather than through logical inference or subsumption), both of which depend sub-stantively on experience rather than deductive rigor and formal elegance, are required and provide help for orientation. To that extent the knowledge appropriate for such an environment is exposure to many cases, the actual training of recognition for conjunctures rather than abstraction and formalization.

As to the issue of the responsibility imposed on practical knowledge, consider the following problems. First, since we know that often we 'make' the situation rather than act within its known constraints, the argumentative side of political interaction can seldom be discounted (Risse, 2000) even if strategic and argumentative steps are in actual negotiations and bargaining hardly separable (Schimmelfennig, 2001). Second, since we know that we act not only in an environment of risk (we do know what we do not know) but at times of the truly 'unknown' (we do not know what we are ignorant of), precautionary measures rather than maximizing principles suggest themselves as maxims for action. Doing no harm, not foreclosing options, rather than instrumental reasoning is then necessary. Third, when we take *practical interest* seriously then — like doctors, lawyers, teachers and decision-makers — we have to learn quickly, that our tasks are powerfully shaped by our *responsibility for the single patient, client, pupil or the particular community*. This task cannot be achieved by retreating to a timeless world in which we have the luxury of being concerned only with what is generally true for mankind in its universality.

Finally, because we know that even in the absence of a catastrophe such as nuclear war, there is a possibility that such an event *could* happen, we also have an obligation to worry about non-events and have to think up cases and scenarios that engage both in counterfactual analysis and in process tracing of single cases. A satisfactory explanation will then no longer be one that plots a case as a 'data point' in some multi-variate analysis, but that accounts for the 'stream of behaviour' through time. It is by this procedure that we discover contextual features that deeply influence outcomes and modify

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supposedly causal relationships between the identified variables. Thus, George's examination of actual deterrence failures corrected in significant ways the explanations derived from highly abstract but rigorous models of deterrence and contributed thereby also to the development of far less provocative policy stances (George and Smoke, 1974).

Similarly, as the controversy between Huth and Russet on the one hand, and Lebow and Stein (Lebow and Stein, 1990; Huth and Russett, 1990), on the other hand showed, universalizability and efficient causality seem poor philosopher's stones. What counts as a 'case' of deterrence and what does not — assessments that are obviously deeply influenced by appraisals rather than by simple observations — derives from the appropriateness of the characterizations rather than from the sheer number of 'observations'. Developing typologies is therefore more useful than focusing on the variables that can be universally ascertained. Similarly, since much of the debate concerns non-occurrences, neither classical probability assessments (based in both subjective and objective probabilities or distributions) nor efficient causality are of much help. In that case, explanations are at their best when using material or finalistic causes in order to buttress their knowledge claims, rather than adduce universal laws and/or efficient causes.

It is this notion of responsibility and the importance of time and of change in human affairs that give Bull's arguments their particular seriousness and urgency. His point is not that theories often mystify their origins in a political project by pretending to deal with the social world as it 'is'. Such arguments have been made by Gramsci (1971) and Cox (1981), and both have asked for the development of a 'critical' rather than a simple problem-solving theory. The former contains as an intrinsic element an 'archaeology', that is, the recounting of how this social world and its actors were made. Bull's point though is, I think, even more principled. Even for a 'problem-solving' theory, we need to understand the peculiar problems of *praxis* and that entails an awareness of our predicament as historical beings.

### Notes

1. This is the assumption behind the assertion in the leading graduate school primer that 'research designed to help us understand social reality can only succeed if it follows the logic of scientific inference' (King et al., 1994: 229).
2. As Jan Assman notes, the Dynasty of Sargon (ended 2154 BC) attained during the first millennium BC paradigmatic status and the Mesopotamians of that time became a 'digging society', obsessed with preserving and finding the remnants of this dynasty which by then had all but disappeared (Assmann, 2000: 42f.).
3. See for instance the attempts of the founders of the 12th Dynasty to 'revive' the

Old Kingdom and to accord to the Pharao Snofru of the 4th Dynasty a certain 'canonical' importance (Assmann, 1990: ch. 2).

4. See the revival of the cult of the Roman Republic and of virtue, particularly among the most radical exponents of the French Revolution.

5. Thus piety meant first loyalty to one's own 'house', parents and the gods protecting the family and its abode. This is why Aeneas was called 'pious' as he took his old father and his son and wife and in order to settle somewhere else when everything else was lost at Troy (Virgil 1990: *Aeneid*, Bk II).

6. That here emotions play a particular role in 'selecting' and making important the things one 'records' is shown by the etymology of the word. Not simply the storage of data is involved but something is entrusted to the 'heart' (cor!) for keeping.

7. Echoing almost the mood of Thucydides' description of the revolution in Corcyra, Josephus writes of the various groups that often used 'religious' motives to justify their terrorist attacks 'so corrupt was the public and private life of the whole nation, so determined were they to outdo each other in impiety towards God and injustices to their neighbours, those in power ill-using the masses and the masses striving to overthrow those in power. One group was bent on domination, the other on violence and on robbing the rich' (Josephus, 1970: 394f).

8. Perhaps this is also one of the reasons why analytical ethics has become so barren or when it actually contributes to solving our practical problems it has to rely on 'interpretation' and that means on 'forms of life' rather than from the calculi of pure models. For a criticism of formalism in ethics see Kratochwil (1998).

9. While it might be problematic to speak about a 'classical' approach one could nevertheless argue that Aristotle's argument about the artificiality of the human world might be the 'core' example of this approach that can then be extended to other similar cases. In distinguishing the 'political' element as a subclass of 'gregariousness' and relating this difference to the notion of 'speech', i.e. the ability to use concepts (as opposed to 'voice' that serves only as a signalling device), Aristotle shows the importance of 'concepts' for the creation of social order. Finally, by demonstrating that these concepts are not simple descriptions of observed 'patterns of behaviour' but are a result of agreement on values he clearly shows that concepts do their work not via the 'representation' or accurate description of an external reality but are 'productive' of the social world, by always being part of a 'project'. Thus even if we no longer share Aristotle's commitment to 'purpose' in nature his remarks remain valid (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253 a 7–18).

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