

A Summary of Ian S. Lustick's "History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias."

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Summary

Ian Lustick's article¹ focuses on the critical problem of blind or selective reliance on secondary historiographical sources by historically-minded political scientists. Lustick observes that political scientists often ground their theoretical narratives within historiographies without paying attention to the issue of how to select historical monographs (1996: 605). Lustick advocates for an approach that does not treat historiographies as "History," but as particular interpretations of history that can be leveraged by political scientists to multiply the number of observations and gain the leverage necessary to make valid inferences: "if we treat our database as "historiography" or "histories" and not "History," then the actual number of "cases" expands from the number of episodes to the number of accounts of those episodes" (ibid). This can help generate enough observations to outnumber variables.

The Problem of Relying on Historiographies

Lustick argues that since historians themselves do not interpret their work as an "unproblematic background narrative from which theoretically neutral data can be elicited for the framing of problems and the testing of theories," political scientists should not do so either (ibid). If they do, they risk falling victim to selection bias, a case where, as Collier (1995: 462) defines it, "the nonrandom selection of cases results in inferences, based on the resulting sample, that are not statistically representative of the population" (quoted in Lustick 1996: 606). This bias can occur when political scientists selects historiographical accounts that implicitly leverage theories of historical events and human behavior that accord with their own political theories (pg. 608). Taking issue with Skocpol (1984)'s interpretation² of the problem as being one of "finding necessary information," Lustick believes that a more difficult problem to resolve is how to "choose sources of 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" (ibid). Lustick points to criticism leveraged against Barrington Moore's seminal 1966 book, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*,³ noting that Moore selectively references historical accounts to support his class-based theory of the English Civil War, to underscore how even some of the most influential works of political science can be a victim of selection bias (pgs. 608-610). This is not a problem unique to historical political science; a contemporary debate amongst historians "is the difficulty of maintaining a position that is "constructivist" enough to recognize the unavoidable intrusion of point of view, implicit theory, and interpretive tropes in the production of "history," but "realist" enough to ascribe actual truth value to some historical accounts" (pg. 613).

Why We can Expect Variance in Historiographical Works

Lustick points to three sources of potential divergence amongst works of historical narrative:(1) Factors related to "the way the past actually unfolded;" (2) Factors related to the way "the relics of the past have been stylized by the institutions that produced them so as to ensure their survival and make

¹ Lustic, Ian S. 1996. "History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias." *American Political Science Review* 90 (3): 605-618.

² Skocpol, Theda. 1984. "Emerging Agendas and Recurrent Strategies." In *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* (Skocpol, ed.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

³ Moore, Barrington. 1966. *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*. Boston, MA: Beacon press.

them available as “primary sources” for historians;” and (3) the presence of “variation in the implicit theories, narrative tropes, and political and personal interests of the historians” (pg. 613).

Four Ways of Overcoming The Biases of Historiographies

Lustick offers four strategies to overcome the biases inherent in historiographical works:

- (1) If there exists a sufficiently rich and long historiographical literature about a particular event or sets of events, one can assume that it generates “a normal distribution of implicit theoretical commitments [...] on the basis of this assumption, real analytic significance could then be attributed to regularities which appear in this historiography despite these (implicitly theoretic) difference” (pg. 615). This requires “drawing on a range of historiography” (ibid).
- (2) Another possible strategy is to provide a lay of the historiographical land, that is, “to grant explicit consideration to the historiographical terrain at the outset of the study, identify the particular approach or school of historiography whose work is most convincing, and indicate its distinctive (even if implicit) theoretical commitments and biases” (ibid). The researcher would then select a historiographical school that did not run parallel to the theory entertained by the researcher.
- (3) Another possible approach is to engage in “quasi-triangulation,” where the political scientist constructs “a background narrative from the identity of claims made by different historians despite their approach from different archival sources and/or implicitly theoretic or political angles” (pg. 616). The problem with this approach is that it is often difficult to flesh out a background narrative from conflicting historical accounts, and it is equally difficult to pit historical approaches against one another without substantial knowledge of the field.
- (4) Finally, scholars may simply embrace transparency and “share the qualitative judgments that led to choices of particular sources for constructing different parts of the background narrative. This might well involve exposing the extent of stylization by explicitly describing different pieces of the background narrative, as the account of individual historians or groups of historians” via discursive footnotes (ibid).

A Brief Critique

My only critique of Lustick’s prognosis and prescriptions is the following: it requires a substantial amount of effort, so much so that it may be better, in some cases, to simply hunt the primary sources for oneself rather than to rely on secondary historical accounts of such sources. Not only will most political scientists be relatively unfamiliar with the substance and details of major historiographic approaches of historical events, but to acquire such knowledge would necessitate a substantial amount of effort and raise the opportunity costs of this approach. It seems that another approach may be to attempt to procure the primary sources for oneself, often using the secondary historical accounts as gateways to the primary source documents (not unlike when one of us refers to a Wikipedia article not for its interpretation of events, but to access the sources cited in the article). While this approach may not always be more expedient, it has the substantial advantage of reducing the proximity between the political scientist and the historical events that are the subject of his/her social inquiry.