

# The Unresolved Debate on the Dichotomy between History and International Relations: A Re-Appraisal

ALEXANDER. C. UGWUKAH PH.D.

## Abstract

There has been an unresolved contention between historians and international relations scholars on the content and composition of the interrelated disciplines. The deliberation among scholars is that international relations is part and parcel of History, while International Relations experts are of the view that History only forms a background to the subject-matter of their own study. Furtherance to these claims is that International Relations is even viewed as part of political science, in which case both historians and International Relations works form a continuum to analysis of major world events. Political scientists therefore agree that International Relations is under their fold, while international relations experts believe that International Relations can stand on its own. In light of these variants of opinions, this work attempts a reappraisal of these three major disciplines- History, International Relations and Political Science, which are highly interconnected but still strive to hold their own stables as independent disciplines. While obviously not refuting the difference in the approaches used by these disciplines, the work concludes that practitioners in these fields needs to do a lot of interdisciplinary borrowings from each other to augment and enrich their researches in the present and the future.

**Keywords:** Dichotomy, Debate, History, International Relations and Political Science.

## Introduction

This may not be the first nor the last of this seemingly problematic dialogue between the two related intertwining disciplines of intellectual importance. Although much speculation has been expressed over the issue by various scholars and partisan schools of thought, yet it is clearly evident that the matter stands unresolved because of the divisive opinions held by scholars and practitioners of the two subject matters. For one, the first contextual issue that arises from the contention is that of who is a historian and who is an international relations practitioner or in other words, a diplomat? Perhaps to get into the root of the matter and obtain a deeper understanding of the issue at stake, there is a vital need to define the two disciplines to justify their positions, context, focus and intellectual diversification. What is History? This is the question put up by eminent historian and philosopher, Edward Hallet Carr several years ago and equally the title of his famous book on the explication of the context and professional detail of historical practice. History has been defined as a chronological record of significant events (as affecting a nation or institution) often including an explanation of their causes and effects.<sup>2</sup> It has also been described as a treatise presenting systematically related phenomena and as a branch of knowledge that records and explains past events. For example, a history of the American Civil rights movement during the 1960s or the political history of the Nigeria regarding the development stages of the country since its very foundations.

History as commonly used has three levels of meanings. First, it can connote the entire human past as it happened. Secondly, and more usefully, history connotes man's attempt to describe and interpret that past which in the words of Professor Barraclough is "the attempt to discover on the basis of fragmentary evidences the significant things about the past". This is the study of history as a social necessity, of being an industry and the sense which comes nearest to the original Greek meaning of history is 'Inquiry' The third meaning which is the systematic study of history as a discipline is a very recent phenomenon, becoming established in west European and north American Universities only in the nineteenth century, far in arrears of philosophy, classical languages, mathematics and natural sciences.<sup>3</sup>

International Relations, on the other hand, has been defined as an area of study or knowledge concerned with relations between different countries<sup>4</sup>. Further, the same dictionary defines international Relations as a branch of political Science concerned with relations between nations and primarily with foreign policies<sup>5</sup>. Thus, it can be clearly argued that basically there is a clear out distinction between the two fields of academic discipline.

## The Nature of the Debate

Perhaps stemming from these definitions are raised several fundamental issues that could throw light on the matter at stake. The most pertinent of the question is that of the bearing of the two disciplines, is History, International relations? Or are international Relations, History? Secondly, is the context between Historians and Political scientist for the possession or ownership of international Relations Obviously, from the definitions given previously by a standard dictionary which presents the subject matter of international relations as a branch of Political Science, which, quite to the contrary may be repulsive to certain historical school of thought who from Adam have seen and portrayed International Relation as an important aspect of the functions that historians engage themselves in that is the recording and interpretations of the relation of nations from their historical

context.

Another major issue stemming from the discussion is that of who could do it better- the historian or the political scientist? Political Science has been defined as the study of the government and how they work and more indepthly as a social science concerned chiefly with the description and analysis of political and especially governmental institutions and processes if that definition is acceptable to us, therefore it seems primarily that institutional relations may just be accepted as part and parcel of what the political scientist engage as their pre occupation. Following from this therefore, does that translate to the fact that historians cannot analyze or describe governmental institutions and processes in their recourse to a “chronological recording of significant events as affecting a nation or institution? It seems clear to me that there is a clash of interest between the ownership and the practitioners of the two disciplines.

The clash is better understood given the glamour attached to international relations as a course of study for practitioners of diplomacy. This clash of interest goes deeper where it is realized that political scientists strongly feel that they can do it better than historians who are sometimes regarded as old timers, old school, archaic and conservative. The seeming quality of a diplomat who derives the learning of his skills from international relations disciplines often thus make him feel superior, modern, more analytical and current than his colleagues, a historian who can hardly resort to the use of theoretical frameworks, engage in scientific analysis through models or simulations and quantitative explanations.

These methodologies at times may seem absurd from the historian who is adeptly concerned with the collection of his two data on facts, interviews, discovery and assessment of artifacts and a careful and in-depth and investigation of how people evolve, devolve, grow and develop in a society. Thus, therefore, while the political scientist may be concerned with the happenings of the current/present (as they often claim), a historian who is concerned with ascertaining the events he is recording or explaining relies on time and appreciate the value of making his work focus on perspectives. He is therefore not too satisfied that the political scientists can hastily to take decisions on the course of events which may eventually be discovered to be fallacious or punctured with distortions and ultimately misleading. It is actually this realization that clearly draws the line of demarcation between the two disciplines, while the political scientist feel that they cannot watch events bypass them on a daily basis, the historian feels he should capture the event immediately too but with a projection for its in-depth inquiry and investigations so as to come out with accurate reports that could guide nation, individuals and the society at large. Surely the foregoing does not exhaust the different views of what International Relations nor does history portend to be for as a foremost scholar has observed; the need for the study of International relations is a recent phenomenon. It started after the First World War and became more pronounced since the end of the Second World War (1945)<sup>6</sup>

“The impetus for the study of international relations therefore resulted from the consciousness that perhaps the two world wars could have been arrested, if there were established modes of intercourse among the nations of the world”<sup>7</sup>

Expatriating further Kolawole posited that

“International Relations is therefore a field of study that is not only concerned with the inter relationship of states actors and non-state actors in the international system but also with their foreign policy strategies, attitudes towards collective security, peace and justice”<sup>8</sup>.

Accordingly, the goal-value of international relations is to draw a level of amicable relationship among the nations of the world by providing opportunities for conflict management and conflict resolution. He noted further that basically the discipline is concerned with the relationships of nations of the world. This may be between two states or among a collectivity of states, wherein in the former, there is a bilateral relations and in the latter, a multi-lateral relationship.

In his own submission, Ayeni-Akeke conceives international relations as the totality of the interactions including for example, cultural, economic, and political, military (strategic studies) scientific, technological engagements among sovereign states<sup>9</sup>. He posits that the term international relations is also used to refer to the scholarly discipline that studies these interactions, adding that “some private national and international organizations or institutions whose activities may transcend the boundaries of sovereign states sometimes intrude on international relations”<sup>10</sup>. He opines that states relate with other forces in their external environment through some determined principles referred to as foreign policy and national interest. If we then therefore sustain the argument of Prof. Kolawole that International Relations became prominent only after the Second World War, then there must have been some forms of designation for the process of relations among states. This is because diplomatic relations and International Law existed before 1914 and by extension before 1945. For as Akinboye and Ottoh have noted “ the history of modern international law really began in 1648 with the inaugurations of the treaty of Westphalia when European states met and dissolved the empire of the church and broke into nation-states which , therefore brought about the concept of sovereignty, territorial integrity, equality and non-interference”<sup>11</sup>.

These principles formed the basis of modern international law, and were reemphasized in the Treaty of Utrecht 1713. In other words, there was international relations before the first and second world wars. If there was an official way of conducting and guiding relations between states, then the study of such inter-states relations must have been the prerogative of some professionals. This understanding brings us yet to another level of the development of international relations and History. According to Kenneth Thompson, “the study of international relations has passed through four stages”<sup>12</sup> the first stage was before the First World War with the emphasis then on diplomatic history. Diplomatic Historians dominated the field of international studies at this period and avoided the study of current affairs as well as deducing any universal principles from their descriptive study of facts. However, the nature of historical study at this level precluded it from evolving a theory of international relations.

The second stage of its development saw the emphasis being placed on the study of current affairs which gained momentum after the first World War and equally leading to the third stage which continued from the first World War through the inter war years and beyond. This was marked by the study of international institutions- the League of Nations and other such bodies evolved at this level. Scholars of international relations at this level were occupied with emotionalism as they sort to develop a legal framework to tackle the international problems of war and of economic and social dimensions<sup>13</sup>. As Akinboye and Ottoh further noted, in the Third stage, the emphasis progressively shifted from diplomatic history and current affairs during the 1920s to international law and organizations in the 1930s and beyond”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the fourth stage of international relations development started with the outbreak of the second World War and this marked a turning point and a further evolutionary trend. This stage shifted emphasis from international law and organization to forces and influences which shape and condition the behaviors of states; such as determinants of foreign policies techniques of the conduct of foreign relations and the mode or resolution of international conflicts. This period also witnessed the emergence (whose chief priest was Hans Morgenthau) of the Realist school while considerable efforts were made to develop the scientific theories of international relations. At this level, the discipline had reached a level of maturity wherein scholars such as David Easton, Karl Deutsch, Morton Kaplan, David Singer, Charles McClelland and Kenneth Boulding began to contribute and wield their thoughts on various aspects of the subject, matter, Talcott Parsons, Hans Morgenthau, Robert Keohane, Joseph Nye, David Singer, K.J Holsti, Thomas Schelling, George Modelski and F.S Northedge, all belong to the leading lights that provided a beacon for the specific study of international relations as a distinct field of endeavor. These scholars attempted to build the behavioral school which had a scientific inclination/ bias as against the traditional school which was rather philosophical, historical and filled with rhetoric.

In all of these, it is clearly discernable that international relations belong both to the realm of History and international law, political science and even others fields as Sociology and Science and Technology. More lately, has been the argument to even separate the study of international relations from political science. But the same contention can hardly hold for the separation of History from international relations. This is because history is international relations while diplomacy and diplomatic history has been an important schedule of historians from immemorial times. From the above stages mapped out for the developmental stages of international relations, one can conveniently call those stages epochal historical development of the discipline. Stanley Hoffman has argued that it is intellectually and analytically possible to distinguish and demarcate the field of study of international relations without necessarily being taught in a separate department<sup>15</sup>. The argument being given from the above assertion is that international relations can stand on its own without being attached to either history, political science or other disciplines such as Economics, psychology, international law and diplomatic studies which are all parts and parcel of the globalization trend. However, Morton Kaplan counters the opinion and believes that international relations is a sub discipline of political science. He is blunt about this. He asserts” I know of no convincing discussion that a specifically international relations discipline exists”. Thus, the boundary problem in international relations has been a recurring issue. However, that is not to say that there is no international relations discipline specifically.

The tendency of this work is that international relations began as diplomatic history and up till now diplomatic history continues to exist. The principal traditional approach of chronological account of events in the field of diplomacy continues till date. The study and understanding of diplomatic history revealed certain aspects of the success and failure of statesmen. It was important to give account of how kings and statesmen conducted their relations with other kings and nations, how wars were waged and fought and how peace was reached eventually. The views and precedents of the past helped to project the future after looking at the present, most fundamentally, the principles and practice of diplomatic conduct, war and peace are essentially the domains of history while the heroes of these events form part of the biographical aspects of History. How possible is it then to divorce of diplomatic personnel since the beginning of times from statesmen since the times of Nicollo Machiavelli, Adolf Hitler Napoleon Bonaparte, Vladimir Lenin, Otton Von Bismarck, Stalin, Harry Truman, Clemenceau, Leon Trotsky Margaret Thatcher, Gerald Ford, Michael Gorbachev, George Bush, Ronald Regan, Nikita Kruschev, Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill? All of these were statesmen of historical relevance

who played significant roles in international relations of their period. Thus, while understanding the acts behaviours and policies of statesmen, scholars of both fields of study must collude or collaborate, because, markers of history are the very personages of international relations policy making. Or how can we reconcile the giants, strides attained by eminent historians such as G.O Olusanya as Nigeria's ambassador to France, Akinjide Osuntokun- Germany, Ade Adefuye, Deputy High Commissioners to Jamaica, United to Kingdom and later Nigeria's ambassador to United States, Al Asiwaju as Commissioner in the National boundary commission. It becomes quite difficult to separate or map out a dichotomy between the two courses with these mergers of personnel.

Therefore as Akinboye and Ottoh has further posited, the utility of the historical approach to the study of international relations lies with the exposition given to changes which have taken place since the two centuries, most especially because diplomacy was restricted to political relationships. Notwithstanding "the failure of the diplomatic historians to study current events or deduce any theoretical frameworks from their descriptive study of facts can stil serve as useful guide for studying the evolution of international relations"<sup>16</sup>. In the reality however, historians must study current affairs because it is current affairs that soon translate to History. The historical approach enables us to examine the extent to which the practices of nations have conformed to norms and goals as the basis for policies. History also helps us to discover how decisions were reached by looking at various inputs and outputs in the decision-making process. Besides the history of international conflicts and causes of instability within the international system can best be understood by making reference to history<sup>17</sup>. Even though history cannot predict the behaviour and actions of statesmen yet history emphasizes that continuity and changes are permanent features of inter-state relations. It is therefore because of these relationship with those ideals which form the perm area features of international Relations that emphasizes that despite the forays made by Political Science unto International Relations, they (scholars) of the discipline and other related ones, must still fall back to the precinct of historical hindsight and evidences to corroborate whatever they are proving scientifically or theoretically. Even then, how much predictions can political scientist or international Relations expert make about the future of leaders, personalities in international politics or the actions of nations themselves? In his inaugural lecture at London school of economics in 1926, when he became the second professor of political science in Great Britain, Harold Laski, declared:

Political science has not the axiomatic quality of mathematics. In its equations, the variables are human beings whose uniqueness prevents their reduction to law in the scientific sense of that much abused word. We deal with tendencies; we can predict upon the basis of experience, but our predictions are limited by the necessity of recognizing that the facts are not within our control. We can influence and attempt and hope; the certainty and precision of the chemist or even psychologist can never be ours"<sup>18</sup>

As Arthur Marwick has shown, the historian concerns by definition, is the past; he may well, as a result of his expertise, make some intelligent predictions about the present and future, but that is not strictly his business. E.H Car has given an example of the kind of prediction the historian might indulge in;

People do not expect the historian to predict that revolutions will breakout in Ruritania next month. The kind of conclusion which they will seek to draw, partly from specific knowledge of Ruritanian affairs and partly from a study of history, is that conditions in Ruritania are such that a revolution is likely to occur in the near future. If somebody touches it off, or unless somebody on the government side does something to stop it, and this conclusion might be accompanied by estimates, based partly on the analogy of other revolutions, of the altitude which different sectors of the population may be expected to adopt"<sup>19</sup>

### **Resolving the Puzzle**

In a bid to bridge the gap between the supposed dichotomy that exists between the two disciplines, History and International Relations, many history departments have merged the two disciplines to reconcile the seeming a differences. Thus, several History departments of universities have adopted new names in what Prof. Ayodeji Olukoju has deemed a nomenclature change<sup>20</sup>. These departments are now known as Departments of History and International Studies or Diplomatic Studies or even Strategic Studies.

As Olukoju has shown, "the entire projects of nomenclature change have generated and still continue to generate a huge debate between its defenders and assailants. The position of the critics is that such mergers amounted a sell-out of history to other disciplines. While the promoters of nomenclature change dismiss these changes as out count<sup>21</sup>. They argue that the change involved a 'rebranding' or repositioning of the subject and that the departments must demonstrate its responsiveness to internal dynamics as well as stimuli and that each

Department of history across the country should be free to determine its character and future. The assailants countered that position arguing that 'hybridization' of history and International Relations or Diplomatic Studies implies a lack of confidence and inferiority to the real course. History as initially conceptualized. However, in his justification, Olukoju asserted that rather than reduce the integrity of the course, the results have been manifold especially in University of Lagos where history Department became Department of History and Strategic Studies. He noted that the action boosted the profile of the subject and that more students have warmed up to new course offerings while lecturers have had to develop new expertise in the face of the fresh challenges and student enrolment rose phonetically<sup>22</sup>. The same experience could be boasted of the department of History and International Studies of Babcock University which started with the same nomenclature in 1999. In recent years however, the rivalry between the department of French and International Studies have reduced the student enrolment into the History & International Studies of the same university although not so drastically. The point being emphasized is that students now contend on which to choose, history and international studies or French / international relations

### Conclusion

However, the point needs to be made that both perspective are not as mutually exclusive as they seem. It is only a demonstration of their intellectual basis as a social science or international relations and history as an Art. While international relations as a discipline would employ facts, uniformity precision, quantifications and testable propositions, the professional historian must also resort to Archaeology, Anthropology, linguistics palaeontology, diplomacy, logic, references to approaches and theories, models, and games theory, systems models, Panegyric literature, dialectical-materialism must accompany him in his methodology at arriving at the background and absolute truth of the issues at stake or being investigated.

In the uniformity of the IR expert, the study must be concerned with the assumptions of discoverable behaviour regularities. In the quantifications, the study must make use of the facts and figures to quantify. The study must also be concerned with precise description and measurement. Finally, the conclusion of the study must include propositions that can be tested by other investigators. These are conditions which makes international relations scientific. This survey of some of the major approaches to the study of international relations, historical, or through political science has shown that there is no consensus among scholars on the best approach. The study has also shown that the two major fields of study –historical and through international relations as a subset of political science have their merits and short-comings.

Thus, while there may be contention on the boundaries of the two fields, the scholars/ researchers in the field, must strive to produce results-oriented researches while using their individual methodologies to bring progress to the problems of mankind in their inter-state relations and to ultimately guarantee a world devoid of internecine warfare and reduction to antagonisms and to guarantee world peace/progress to mankind. In the final analysis, then, is there really a dichotomy between History and International Relations? The decision is on how, you, the researcher articulates your research focuses. It would be tedious to rehearse the traditional argument here once again. That is if History is science or social science, as our forerunners have done?

As Marwick has noted; "there is no great point exaggerating the differences between the activities of the historian and those of the social sciences or natural sciences Let us summarize the main school of thought on this discourse. First, the professionals on both sides of the line are arranged in shining armour against each other; the historians call a plague upon the social science (of which Political science and international Relations belong) for their pretentiousness that they are more scientific, while the social Scientist argues it out against the historians for their vagueness. Some great historians such as E.H Carr, Marc Bloch and the Annals School and possibly most continental historians are clear that History is a social Science. Some in this school have gone so far as to enlarge that history is the central social science, off which all others must feed. History, H.C Darby has suggested, is basic to social science rather than in the way mathematics is a basic to natural science"<sup>23</sup>

The fact is there is no easy answer to all the issues raised here: to discuss them is extremely valuable; to answer them is only really necessary when it comes to university organization and administration but the present divisions or dichotomy as we initially conceived should be taken as divisions within a deeper unity, serve as useful purpose and have certain common sense validity. It follows that each discipline must be ready to make useful borrowings from other disciplines. As Marwick finally posited; of no subject is this more true than History: it is to history's vital contact with the social sciences that we now turn"<sup>24</sup> This is equally true of the leanings and borrowings that other disciplines must make from History which is but the father of all other disciplines.

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