The deployment of rigorous, transparent and systematic research methods is probably what most distinguishes the production of social scientific knowledge from other discursive forms. In this sense, methods are at the very foundation of the academic profession, and are a central part of core training for the next generation of researchers. The book edited by Guillaume Devin does a real service to the International Relations (IR) community, by combining clear how-to guides with lucid discussions of a variety of methods to account for social facts at the global level.

Anchored in the rich tradition of French international political sociology, the book seeks to explore research tools that range from interviews to archival methods, from cartography to statistics, and from the analysis of discourse to that of images. This broad survey, which will primarily speak to students but can also serve more advanced researchers in their exploration of new tools, is particularly well-grounded in the tangible experience of research. Here, methods are conceived not as abstract schemes, but as actual tools to be handled in practice, against the background of the standards of competence that are collectively debated and implemented by the community of researchers. We are very far from the many grand treatises on epistemology that, all too often, would have us believe that methodology is first and foremost an issue of metatheory. At the base of social sciences are concrete practices of research rooted in a variety of methods that come with their own strengths and weaknesses.

The first substantive chapter by Devin and Durand specifically aims to introduce the “three moments” in the practice of research: description, representation, and interpretation. Resolutely inductive in spirit, the presentation helps articulate the different parts of social scientific knowledge, and reminds the reader of the primacy of how-questions over why-questions. This is a methodological postulate that would deserve to be taken much more seriously than it currently is, in an IR field obsessed with choice-theoretic explanation. That said, the reader would appreciate more direction as to how competing interpretations may be adjudicated. What is to be done when the same empirical findings lead to conflicting conclusions? Overall, the
book often eschews the fundamental question of the standards of validity by which we should evaluate social scientific knowledge.

In order to evaluate this textbook, one should ask how better prepared the reader ends up in their application of the method in question. To this end, the presentation should be didactic (with a simple description of the method’s logic), practical (with a focus on its actual use) and reflexive (with an awareness of what the method can and cannot do). On that score, two chapters are particularly impressive. That by Cohen and Ramel on image analysis, to begin with, succeeds in providing an antidote to the “visual illiteracy” that plagues the field of IR. The authors explain a number of approaches to “make images speak,” ranging from semiotics to esthetics through iconography. They also insist on the need to place images in their social context, including their conditions of production and circulation. Another very useful chapter is that of Alles, Guilbaud and Lagrange on interviews. Key issues of positionality, access and treatment are discussed in a simple but efficient way. The authors draw attention to important questions that researchers should ask themselves prior to doing interviews, including the specific purposes that they are pursuing, as well as the validity and ethical challenges that the method entails.

It is also a key strength of the book that it covers some less orthodox methods in the field of IR, including visual analysis, as already mentioned, but also the construction of maps (chapter 5), the use of archives (chapter 3), or “descriptive” statistical methods such as multiple correspondence analysis (MCA, chapter 11). When it comes to the fourth part of the book, which deals with quantitative approaches, it would have been useful to get a more direct engagement between the authors, who happen to harbour competing views on the status of numbers in IR. For example, what would Martin-Mazé, whose statistical technique (MCA) does not aspire to make causal claims, respond to Hug’s argument that “causal inference” should be a principal goal of social science (p. 193)? Similarly, expanding the debate across the infamous “qual-quant” divide, how would the qualitative researchers featured earlier in the book respond to Tiberj’s claim that statistics are the only way to augment the generality of our findings (p. 182)? Cannot concepts also help climb the ladder of abstraction, for instance? Here we reach the point where any methods discussion also involves intractable methodological assumptions that are worth debating explicitly, as Chapter 13 (by Dieckoff, Martin and Tenenbaum) begins to do.

There are two further areas the book could have better explored for the benefit of the reader. First, the book would have gained from more engagement with broader disciplinary evolutions in IR, especially outside the French academic field. Chapters 2 (by Lindemann) and 10 (by Hug) are better situated in the international literature, which is primarily in English, although somewhat incompletely. More puzzling is Tiberj’s opening observation in Chapter 9, that “Quantitative approaches have bad press” in IR, which seems disconnected from the complete domination that regression analysis exerts in most departments across North America and several European countries. Meanwhile, the contribution on discourse analysis (chapter 12) does a great job of comparing content analysis to theoretical exegesis, but in so doing it ignores the cottage industry of texts in English that also deal with the method – in IR and beyond. For instance, Lene Hansen’s (2005) primer on the basic models of discourse analysis would have been a particularly useful interlocutor in such a pedagogical discussion. Overall, as Chapter 12 exemplifies, the book would probably have been better served by surveying some of the best methodological
applications produced around the world, instead of proposing very brief (and inevitably superficial) original illustrations by the authors.

Second, the book could have been better in sync with contemporary IR debates on methods. Three examples of this partial decoupling stand out. First, none of the chapters centered on statistical methods (9, 10 and 11) engages substantively with the raging revolution of big data. Yet this new deal has already started to transform both the type of evidence and the specific statistical methods used by researchers. Second, nowhere in the book is there a mention of the huge uproar that emerged in the United States in recent years over the infamous imperative of DART (Data Access and Research Transparency, see https://www.dartstatement.org/). Imported from quantitative methods, this new requirement, which has been adopted by many top journals in political science, has already started to transform the practices of fieldwork that Louis, Martens and Saiget document in Chapter 7, for instance. Third and finally, the otherwise informative chapter by Albaret and Placidi-Frot, which analyses the United Nations website as both a tool and object of research, fails to take into account the social media revolution of the past ten to fifteen years. Arguably, websites have now become secondary to Youtube videos, Instagram posts, Twitter feeds, Facebook “likes” and other interactive devices – critical new online practices (including for the UN) that are unfortunately ignored by the authors for the most part.

In the end, though, these suggestions for further development should not detract from the fact that this textbook is likely to become mandatory reading for any IR student on the cusp of trying their hand at the vertiginous task of research in the global field.