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# *International Relations and international relations: The Links Between Theory and Practice in World Politics*



MY AIM IN THIS OPENING ADDRESS IS TO ASK ONE SIMPLE QUESTION: WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE STUDY AND PRACTICE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS?<sup>1</sup> I want to answer this question by outlining and then dismissing two popular, persuasive and seemingly attractive accounts of that relationship before outlining my own. But before I do that, I need to make three brief comments about the context in which this question is being asked.

The first relates to time: this question is being posed after the war in Iraq, a war that the academic discipline has seemingly stood apart from as if it were unrelated to the ways in which we research and teach the subject. Indeed, at the International Studies Association (ISA) conference in Portland in February 2003, just before the outbreak of the war, there was little mention of it except for the activities of a few demonstrators who bravely protested the forthcoming war, thereby attracting predictable criticism for bringing their values into their professional

activity (to be explicit and honest so that my values are open to scrutiny, I joined their protest, as did the then President, John Vasquez). Before that, there had been the war in Afghanistan and the events of 11 September; and throughout this period there has been the continuing Palestine/Israel confrontation. These examples, and specifically the way in which the profession remains strangely quiet, almost silenced, by them and other realities of world politics, make this a particularly relevant time to enquire into the links between theory and practice.

The second contextual comment concerns space: this address was presented in Budapest, in Central Europe, a particularly relevant place to raise fundamental questions about the relationship between academia and politics. This is because of the particular history of scholarly enquiry during the period of communist rule, specifically the pervasiveness of a dominant ideologically-prescribed orthodoxy. This orthodoxy resulted in an official "truth" that allowed little debate and thus supported a very specific

relationship between academia and politics. Hence, as academic disciplines develop out of that stifling context, free from state *diktat*, the question of the linkage of the discipline of International Relations with, and its obligations to, civil society seem especially timely.

The third context is that of culture: the events of 11 September should have alerted the discipline to the existence of very different belief systems, and subjectivities, in world politics. These call into question many of the core assumptions of Western social science, notably those relating to an underlying rationality for human social action. This rationality sees a world moving towards a common future, one of liberal democracy and market economics, with societies being essentially differentiated in terms of their position on the great conveyor belt of history. This conveyor belt carries all societies towards a common end-state, one populated by the instrumentally rational, value-maximising individual of Western social science. According to this view, different subjectivities are “merely” temporary diversions on the road to globalisation and modernisation. More specifically, this account of the social world gives one precise answer to the question about the nature of the relationship between theory and practice, one that insists on a separation between the two, and it is this that I wish to question in this address.

In my view, the most pressing question for the discipline to address is this: are academics bound to engage in the practices of international relations, or is it their duty to avoid getting involved in such issues because academia is meant to be “neutral,” set apart from the concerns of the immediate political agenda? Let me give two ways of answering this question, both of which I wish to reject.

The first is the view that academics should stand apart from debates about

international relations because they should instead remain value-neutral about political events. According to this view, academic integrity consists of avoiding avowedly normative questions. Dependent ultimately on empiricist conceptions of knowledge, and licensed by positivist accounts of method, this view, common in much United States (US) social science (not just International Relations but also economics, political science, psychology and sociology), sees academic work as necessarily separate from the “real” world of politics, society and economics. Indeed, this view sees academic work as properly limited to reporting on that world, a world separated from academia. Accordingly, scholarly integrity comes from maintaining a distance from the world on which one is reporting, with this integrity a core consequence of the commitment of US social science to notions of value-free enquiry. This underlying notion of value-free enquiry therefore distinguished between facts and values, between observer and observed, between analysis and the subject of analysis, between the tainted world of politics and the secure, neutral reflective scholarly bastion of academia.

Not only does this view stress the importance of maintaining the separation between International Relations and international relations, but it also is severely critical of those who do not respect this distinction. Within International Relations there have been many such disciplining moves, right back to the famous distinction between Idealism and Realism, through the disciplinary disputes between behaviouralists and classicists, and now manifested in the attack by rationalist scholars on reflectivist work, that is to say those engaged in post-modernist, feminist and gender, Critical Theory, ethnic and cultural approaches to International Relations. It is critically

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important to note that the complaint against reflectivist work is not so much that it paints pictures of the “wrong” worlds of international relations, but that these approaches are not legitimate forms of social science, with significant attendant consequences on careers, tenure, and publishing prospects deriving from such attacks on scholarly legitimacy. These approaches are seen as lying outside the realm of the legitimate social science canon.

The problem with this account of the relationship between academia and the political world is that it is based on a historically specific, and questionable, view of the nature of social science. This view maintains that it is indeed possible for analysis to be secured by resort to firm foundations for knowledge claims. The difficulty is that this view is itself contestable, on the grounds that there are indeed no such clear-cut metatheoretical and transculturally secure epistemological foundations. In my view, it is not the so-called “relativist” who has the problem, but instead the person who denies that their own work is relativistic to the culture and setting in which they are operating. In other words, those who attack approaches as relativistic are doing so on the basis of knowledge claims that are themselves partial, themselves historically and socially constituted and thus themselves reflecting specific social, economic and political forces. As Cox (1981) so famously put it, theory is always for someone, always for some purpose.

In my view there is no view from nowhere, no secure, isolated academic refuge, away from power, outside politics, economics, society and culture. All knowledge is partial; there is no correspondence account of truth; theory is not the mirror of nature, and thus all knowledge claims about the world are made in the context of power. This context has two

main effects: first it affects the questions that are asked (for example, think of the relationship between the discipline of International Relations in the 1930s and the interests of the dominant powers, the United Kingdom and the US; similarly, think of the relationship between the main themes of International Relations since 1945 and the policy agenda facing the US). The second effect is that the context affects, and is itself affected by, the very categories within which we think, within which we construct both our disciplines but also our inter-subjective worlds. Strong examples are the ways in which the discipline has distinguished between inside and outside, between politics and economics, between “us” and “them,” between deaths by politics and death by economics.

Thus, to maintain that there is a secure isolated place where “real” academics can report on the world itself relies on a prior, usually unstated, notion of the world. Such a view of social science takes the world as given as it presents itself to the analyst, as external, as separate, and does not therefore enquire into how theories both construct, reconstruct and are then constructed in turn by that world. Of course, my own position is itself open to criticism. The main point of such a criticism would centre on the possibility that I was either trying to import my own values into analysis, under the guise of claiming that everyone had to bring their own values to their work, or that I was misrepresenting the nature of social science so as to undermine genuinely independent academic enquiry. Such positions have been well discussed by Walt (1998), Keohane (1989), and Katzenstein *et al.* (1998) in their criticisms of reflectivist work in the discipline. For these writers, work that does not accept the possibility of value-neutrality lies outside the social scientific enterprise, and thus risks marginalisation

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since (the writers claim) they eschew the very possibility of independent, scholarly activity. Thus, the quote Katzenstein *et al.* (1998:678) that the journal *International Organization* (IO) has published little reflectivist work

*since IO has been committed to an enterprise that postmodernism denies: the use of evidence to adjudicate between truth claims. In contrast to conventional and critical constructivism, postmodernism falls clearly outside of the social science enterprise, and in IR research it risks becoming self-referential and disengaged from the world, protests to the contrary notwithstanding.*

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The second view of the relationship between International Relations and international relations is that academia has a duty to aid the politicians of the state in which it is based; its duty is to speak truth to power. As Wallace (1996:305) put it, International Relations academics have 'a duty of constructive and open criticism: to speak truth to power, not to hide our knowledge in obscurely erudite terminology, nor to lose ourselves in scholastic word games, nor to speak truth in secret only to each other.' The discipline is, he warns, in danger of taking 'refuge in increasing abstractions, theories and meta-theories' (1996:311), which he sees as easier and more fun than the hard work of detailed case studies. Wallace (1996:317) proposes that academics engage with the world of practitioners rather than 'the passionate detachment which postmodernists affect — proclaiming that they wish to transform the world while avoiding contact with those who exert significant influence over the world.' Interestingly, Wallace makes a point recently taken up by the English Secretary of State for Education, Charles Clarke; Wallace (1996:320-21) notes that

focusing on theory might lead to funding cuts in university departments since

*we cannot justify our discipline primarily in aesthetic or philosophical terms ... we should not seek to constitute a closed monastic order. The doors of the university should remain open ... to offer our critical wisdom and our expertise to those who have to struggle with the dilemmas of power.*

In the last three months Charles Clarke has posed a very similar challenge to universities in England, asking what they are for, and arguing that they have to be justified by an engagement with the societies in which they are based. Subjects that do not undertake such an engagement should not necessarily be funded by the state.

There are several problems with this account of the relationship between theory and practice. I will list five main ones. First, such a viewpoint focuses on the formal political process rather than on a wider notion of civil society; similarly the referent object is the state and its concerns not those of civil society. In other words, this is a very narrow view of politics. Secondly, this view adopts the state's view of politics and thus this sets the political agenda. Accordingly, this view posits far too close a relationship between the discipline of International Relations and the world of state power, with the result that students are taught to take the world of the leading politicians as the world of politics, and accept their agendas as given. Thirdly, this view tends towards the anti-intellectual in that it denies the possibility and desirability of the discipline reflecting on itself, and on the definitions of politics that it works within. Fourthly, the injunction to speak truth to power implies that those in power are listening. It is not obvious that power wants to hear from academia unless it is saying

what power wants to hear. Nor is it at all clear that politicians are listening for new ideas or novel interpretations; instead they relate to ideas much as consumers do to a supermarket — they look through it and pick the mix of insights and ideas that suit them by helping them to achieve their existing policy preferences. Finally, such a view leads to an International Relations that is essentially problem-solving theory rather than emancipatory. This means that the discipline takes the politician's agenda as given, and the world is thereby naturalised. It also makes it difficult to relate to power if you do not accept this agenda, and the effect is thus that the discipline can barely speak about absolutely major political issues such as famine, poverty, gender, and racism since they are not central to the agenda of politicians.

Both of these approaches are therefore problematic, and they are problematic because they each accept two underlying assumptions: the first is that they see theory as explanatory; therefore on the one hand it can be separated from politics and power, and on the other it can thus speak truth to power. In both cases, this assumption relies on a separation between academia and power because of a prior and uncontested commitment to an explanatory notion of theory. The second is that both views see a separation between theory and practice; for the theorist who wishes to keep values out of analysis, theory and practice are separate spheres of activity and can (and should) be kept apart. On the other hand, for the policy-advocate the two spheres of activity are separate but can be joined together in a particular way, that is to say by speaking truth to power.

In my view, the relationship between International Relations and international relations depends on questioning these two assumptions and in their place posit-

ing rather different relationships. Thus, in response to a view of theory as explanation, I would wish to argue for a view of theory as constitutive of practice, and in response to the claims for a need to keep separate theory and practice, I see the two activities as unavoidably and inextricably linked together. To restate: there is no view from nowhere, and therefore International Relations and international relations are always going to be unavoidably intertwined together. There is to my mind no neutral policy analysis, no "truth" to speak to power. Equally there is no neutral academia, no secure space protected by the castle walls of epistemological foundationalism. Instead, all academic activity involves working within the context of power, at the nexus of the power/knowledge relationship. In my view all our theories reflect and support specific social forces, and all of them treat some aspects of the social world as primary, as privileged, and as the context within which we develop our accounts and theories. There are many good examples of how to deal with these kinds of issues explicitly: I would particularly point to the work of Campbell and Booth as good examples of how to raise these kinds of concerns in a way that is both open and an aid to policy-relevance.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, the options for International Relations scholars are neither to retreat to splendid isolation, trying to be separate from the world of international relations; nor to claim a special privileged understanding of the world of international relations which allows the scholar to speak truth to power. Instead International Relations academics have to accept that questions of ethics and morality are unavoidably implicated in all academic enquiry, and are never more important and significant than when their absence is asserted or proclaimed. Thus, the most powerful political statements

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come from those who see such an absence as a feature of their work, allowing them to concentrate on focussing on the “facts” and drawing from them a set of practical implications which make some actions seem more “commonsensical” than others.

All of this brings me back to the war in Iraq. What follows from the above argument is that any policy recommendation was intrinsically a political one, intrinsically normative; similarly, any refusal to engage with the war reflected specific social and political forces, a precise configuration of the power/knowledge relationship. In my view, International Relations has to accept that it is unavoidably engaged in political and ethical work whenever it teaches, researches, or advocates policy. Accepting that there is no such thing as theory isolated from power, and accepting that there is no separate realm of “policy,” outwith theory and knowledge claims, each of which can be kept separate or can be joined in prescribed (legitimate) ways, is to my mind the next move for a discipline that has for too long worshipped at the altar of value-free social science. International Relations has simply not accepted the possibility that the very core move of proclaiming the distinction between facts and values is itself implicated in specific accounts of politics and ethics. Thus, basing such a position on epistemological certainties is no protection from the partiality of such an account of the relationship between knowledge and power. Once again, my claims here can be strongly resisted on the grounds that the logic of my position is to make dialogue and synthesis impossible, eventually resulting in a form of nihilistic relativism. This form of criticism has been made by Moravcsik who argues that

*Smith's alternative of greater theoretical pluralism is arbitrary and, ironically, a con-*

*servative plea for disciplinary stasis ... [it] proposes no workable alternative except freezing the academic status quo ... he treats diversity as always superior to non-diversity — a sort of theoretical “affirmative action” in which anything goes.<sup>3</sup>*

In place of the current dominant view of social science that underpins the discipline, a view that relies on a culturally specific account of the relationship between theory and practice, I believe that it is time that the discipline realised that we are all caught up in hermeneutic circles of understanding and intersecting subjectivities. All our views are views from somewhere. Truth is not a feature of the world; it is not something that we can grasp, or access or achieve, since all truths are partial. A mature academic discipline needs to reflect more on the rules by which we negotiate, not insist on, the ways to distinguish and combine these varying versions of truth. Truth is not something that we find, it is something we create, and we create it consciously or unconsciously in support of some social forces and not others. Recognising that power and knowledge are inescapably intertwined is the next step in developing a more mature discipline of International Relations, and this recognition requires us to probe the rules by which we negotiate engagement with the world of international relations.

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## NOTES:

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1 Following conventional usage I will use International Relations (or just IR) to refer to the academic discipline and international relations to refer to the events of world politics.

2 See, for example, Campbell (1998), and Booth (1991a; 1991b).

3 See Moravcsik (2003). This paper by Moravcsik is part of a forum in the journal dealing with Synthesis and Dialogue, and contains my paper, to which Moravcsik is referring (Smith 2003).

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