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A Statement of Intent

Martin Weber¹

I would like to begin by first expressing my gratitude to the editors of *Global Discourse* for inviting me to publish this Statement of Intent, which began life as a keynote address, delivered in Newcastle in 2008 at the *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Politics* Conference. This gave me a chance to participate in an exceptionally enriching, challenging, and perspective-changing couple of days, and an opportunity to encounter directly the kind of scholarly spirit which sustains the project of this journal. I feel particularly privileged to be part of this project's launch, because it seems to me to yield extraordinary promise, of which more below.

When the editors first suggested that I impart a few thoughts on “something topical, exciting, and challenging” (as they put it), my mind almost instantly turned towards what may easily sound like an old chestnut, boring, and rather common-place ... not at all topical, or exciting, least of all challenging. But if I've had any outstanding experience of more general value worth talking about in the 11 years since I began my PhD, it definitely and most centrally has to do with a key issue we can usefully sum up as the issue of “Somebody Else's Problem”. This sounds cryptic, so let me expand and shed some light on this by utilising the time-honoured practice of explaining what I mean with reference to the literary master-piece which first introduced the concept. Here, I speak of course of none other than the main work of the eminent Cosmologist and Proprietor of the School of Realist Absurdism, Douglas Adams; the astounding, resourceful, and thoroughly hilarious *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. As this book is now over 3 decades old, I hold few illusions regarding the degree to which its contents is still working knowledge among contemporary social scientists, and I shall briefly introduce the passage on the problem of SEP.

According to Douglas Adams, SEP is constituted as a field, generated artificially, which can be projected by a powerful device in order to conceal any object comprehensively by utilising the sheer power of suggestion. An object protected by the SEP field will appear to onlookers and even trespassers as something which is entirely, utterly and totally somebody else's problem, so much so that it becomes so thoroughly ignored that one even moves around it without realising that one has altered one's path to avoid it: I'll simply feel I really wanted to walk a curve instead of a straight line, without giving an account to myself in terms of the ‘object’ which caused me to do so (I can feel a few Wittgensteinean late Nietzscheans perking up here...). In Douglas Adams' novel, the device is used to conceal a spaceship right slap bang in the middle of a cricket ground, *during* a match (which might be a comment on cricket itself...), but its metaphorical transfer to another field signals, I would suggest, something far more troubling. And this is the thought:

Much of our scholarly activity in the social and political ‘sciences’ proceeds as if it were constrained by something like SEPs. And I would stress this despite the fact

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in recent decades we have had more or less incessant talk of the need for more ‘inter-disciplinary’ research agendas, and despite the fact that – occasionally – such things even got a little bit of research funding. In general, however, I’d submit that there has been a worrying trend in recent years towards the retrenchment of a form of the disciplinary division of labour, which is, I think, destined to lead to trouble with regard to the substantive problems we face. Now, this is a tall claim, and I can certainly not embark on an effort to prove the value of this thesis comprehensively to you. My first move is hence to concede that my allegation may be somewhat overstated. However, what I can do here is engage in rendering a few exemplary constellations in support of my general claim, and to suggest in what ways they are indicative of a problem we are already facing in our substantive research agendas. Before I do this, a quick aside:

I can almost hear the internal sighs of the ardent pragmatists among you: “O divine Spaghetti-Monster in the sky, not another one of those academic laments... - pointless navel-gazing when we’ve got work to do, problems to solve, and pages to edit”. I sympathise deeply. I would, however, appeal to the Machiavellian in you, and suggest that what follows can also be read as advice for positioning yourself for the increasingly savage world that is higher education research and teaching. What follows, then, contains at least an element of ruminations concerning ‘career development’ insofar as it is aimed at keeping the mid-to-long term perspective of sustaining academic work in focus, a perspective which becomes an easy casualty of the contemporary audit idiocies.

Back to SEPs. ‘Somebody Else’s Problem’ is, in our general field of interest, the Social Sciences, manifested firstly by the ‘disciplinary division of labour’. It is hence inherently affixed to the practice of drawing boundaries and distinctions, and the institutional framework which corresponds to the maintenance of these. This division of academic labour became slowly entrenched only during the course of the 19th century, and it is worth recalling that the University as an institution of institutes in the sense in which we understand it today, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although ‘specialisation’ obviously existed before, it had much more to do with the abilities and inclinations of the individuals employed at universities, than it did with a perceived need to organize discretely, hermetically and hermeneutically self-enclosed domains of knowledge. However, with the growth of knowledge, and the rapid pace of technological change unleashed in the 19th century, the age of the ‘generalist’ came to a relatively rapid end—the last ‘professor’ productive in virtually all knowledge domains of his age was probably Hegel. It would be easy to presume that the changes were mainly brought on by the rise of technical-practical interests, the project of turning theoretical research into devices, procedures and epistemes for manipulating and controlling nature. In favour of this view we could quote the rapid advances in medicine, but also agricultural biology, next to the physical sciences giving rise to mechanics, engineering, statics, and kinetics.

The successes of knowledge production aimed at bringing natural ‘events’ under control consolidated the emerging field of methodology, which in turn shored up the disciplinary division of labour. Depending on what it was one aimed to achieve, the respective ‘thing’ under investigation would require procedural principles constituted as part of its object-domain. Methodology, ‘knowledge of method’, or the ‘science’ of deciding how to track a pathway, took on a new significance, and it did so mainly because the ‘old’ philosophical order had been pervasively shattered. If you

look at this from the perspective of the ‘triad’ of ontology, epistemology, methodology (a mainstay of introductory texts to social and political science), the effect of the enlightenment was to ‘restack’ the three. Since the Greeks, ontology had occupied a privileged position, raising ‘first order’ questions as the primary site of inquiry and knowledge forming attention: Cosmology, the big questions of meaning and theology, the exploration of what was beyond the physical (meta ta physica); all these, according to philosophy with a capital P were to be clarified first before anything else could be addressed. Epistemological principles followed on from ontological explorations, and methodological concerns arose equally only in relation to those. The enlightenment shifts this comprehensively. Already, as early as Galilei and Bacon respectively, and signalling the end of the Renaissance, the reorientation in materialist terms takes on the form of a methodological and epistemological reorientation of the whole of knowledge production. In phenomenological terms, we have a shift from knowledge obtained through contemplation (‘beholder’s knowledge’) towards the *verum factum* principle. Bacon’s explorations lend the latter particular clout. The idea is now that we *know* positively what we have *made*, leading to the ideal of knowledge construction as the ‘reconstruction’ of ‘creation’. In Bacon, the theological underpinnings of the latter are still well alive, even as he knowingly undermines its very premises by outlining a maximalist project of reconstructive science. When we have made a thing we know it, which invokes the image of the divine watchmaker. On this premise, nothing can be known a priori as was stipulated by the ‘old’ philosophy dedicated to speculative thought and ontology. *What* a thing is (and hence its ontological status) would now have to be confirmed through the process of dissection and reassembly. Maker’s knowledge, thus understood, elevates to a hegemonic position, and this is not broken by the eventual shift from ‘materialism’ and ‘empiricism’ to rationalism; a shift necessitated by the problematic assumptions of empiricism regarding the status of ‘data’. Precisely what could or should count as *given* turned quickly out to be contingent in an interesting sense upon the active mind involved in the investigations. Descartes’ rationalist revolution, and Kant’s critique of the inconsistencies of empiricism and scepticism are, however, equally related to the *verum-factum* doctrine: the mind as ‘maker’, as the active part in categorising, classifying, relating and reconstructing, produces knowledge, which it can know *as* knowledge by virtue of the faculty of reason—the latter becoming the only ‘datum’ in this context.

Nothing, so far, has been said about the social sciences, and that is because they didn’t exist as discrete knowledge domains. Political Economy gets in early, not as a discipline, but as an expanded elaboration of the doctrinal explorations of human nature initiated by Hobbes and Locke. Political Economy emerges as a subset of the study of morality and a general concern with what holds the emerging bourgeois society together, and insofar remained part of a general, undivided, and catch-all inquest into the question of what makes humans human. Psychology, History, and the various Humanities lead an overlapping existence in the academy, and it is not until the 19th century, and especially the works of Saint-Simon and Comte, that an attempt is made to complement the *political economy* of the Scottish Enlightenment with a theory of the social constitutive of a discipline in the University Canon. The ‘lateness’ of the social sciences is only compounded by their ‘interestedness’, their undeniable alliance with the rise of the new political hegemony of the bourgeois industrial society, colonialism, supremacism, and imperial expansion. As one can read in both Foucault and Said, the emergence of the disciplines of the humanities and

social sciences are to a large degree complicit in the increase of control, both of the regulation of modern lives domestically, and the domestication of the ‘lives of others’ elsewhere. I think, however, it would be problematic to leave things at the critique of social scientific knowledge as domination. While this is certainly apt, it is neither exhaustive, nor analytically satisfying for our concern with the emergence of the disciplinary division of labour as propounding the rise of SEPs.

Instead, we will have to look somewhat more closely at the conditions under which the disciplinary division of labour emerges. There is another figure in the mists of time who helps in important ways to unlock some of the mysteries of the relatively rapid establishment of mutually increasingly unintelligible disciplinary canons. This figure is the ‘founding father’ of social constructivism, Giambattista Vico. Vico may not be familiar to many of you, unless you happen to have an interest in International Political Economy, where Robert Cox spent some time introducing his work, or you are an eclectically interested Marxist political scientist, involved in running battles between structuralists and constructivists. Vico’s subversive move, which reverberates mostly unacknowledged until today, was to radicalise the ‘*verum-factum*’ principle: If we can only know what we have made, we can’t *actually* know the universe, geology, the earth, animals, our bodies, or any of the other things so beloved to the natural sciences, because we haven’t actually made those. The only thing we actually have made, in any proper sense of the word, is *history* in the widest understanding, and the cultural expressions we have given it. Thus Vico embarks on the ambitious journey to found a ‘new science’ (*Scienza Nuova*), in a magisterial, if highly idiosyncratic and occasionally hilariously inaccurate, book tracking the cultural and historical evolution of human life on earth in precisely those terms. This epistemological reversal of the ‘data’ / ‘fact’ distinction, which reconfigures the latter and gives them primacy over the former, has methodological consequences which still have currency in today’s debates. I will return to this point a little later, so let’s now just apprehend the significance of this move, which now raises the question of ‘social ontology’, one which, of course, Marx was to make much of in the first instance.

My reason for bringing in Vico is primarily to make plausible why the story of the disciplinary division of labour can and should not be reduced to the narrative of the progress of ‘disciplining’ under the entrenchment of modern forms of social and political power. This line of inquiry is helpful only up to a point. For what we can see with Vico’s intervention is a dissonance within the very enlightenment project itself, for which Foucault’s narrowly construed theory of power, for one, leaves very little room. In Vico’s reshuffling, we get the first inclination of the dyad which would later become the ‘explaining/understanding’ divide, alive until today and right up into the finer details of debates over the respective roles of quantitative and qualitative methods in the social sciences.

Between Vico’s move of making ‘culture’ central on the one hand, and the onward march of naturalism on the other, we get the emergence of the social sciences. Comte’s positivism, fuelled by Saint Simon’s optimism about the rational reform of human affairs, made society the object of *planning* and design, signalling for the first time the comprehensive ‘distancing’ of the inquirer from the object of inquiry in the field of ‘human affairs’. Intended to shadow the methodological rigour of the natural sciences, and in particular physics, *sociology* was conceived with the explicit aim of reforming and thoroughly modernizing the ‘way of life’ of 19th century burgeoning populations. The project was fully underwritten by the unreconstructed belief that scientific advances would ultimately render human affairs, as well as individual

motivations, aims and passions, fully transparent, and thus available for purposeful improvement.

Now, around the same time, universities underwent a significant change. The growth of knowledge, and particularly of the new technical-practical knowledge concerned with exploring the 'science-technology' link, already led to disciplinary specialisation, and an increasing division of labour. In the natural sciences, the discovery of covering laws that were clearly not 'mechanistic', such as on display in Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, led to a pluralization of disciplines, and to an increasingly entrenched acceptance that different object domains required different knowledges and procedures, leading to internal differentiations within large fields such as physics, chemistry, biology, and, eventually, also the humanities.

Throughout all this, the ideal of objective, distancing based inquiry remained unchallenged, and even a dialectical thinker such as Marx, whose Hegelian origins could have prompted a different outlook, could only make gestures towards complicating the enlightenment ideal of the possibility of comprehensive transparency. The differentiation of the social sciences, progressing towards the establishment of political science, anthropology, and eventually psychology, progressed under this general proviso, basically until Freud.

It was Freud's work, which first cast comprehensive doubt on the notion of 'self-transparency' so clearly at the basis of the progressivist logic underpinning the formations of the social science disciplines. The 'discovery' of the subconscious, the precariousness of 'ego' and all associated with it, constituted the first methodologically efficacious challenge to the notion of the 'rational individual', which had underpinned social and political thought since Hobbes, and had been considered in most approaches as historically emergent. Aided by world events, the enlightenment optimism of the 19th century, and the strong commitment to social and political change based on the 'remaking' of the 'collective self' through social engineering under the guidance of critical reason, gave way to more pervasive scepticism. Aided by Freud's work, but also increasingly by developments in the philosophy of science, the split between interpretive and explanatory knowledges became more and more entrenched, and the division of disciplinary labour proliferated. In the field of economics, and with the aid of the 'marginalist revolution', political economy gave way to 'disciplinary' economics, dissociated from social and political questions, and internally further differentiated into 'micro-' and 'macro-' foci.

Within the newly differentiated disciplines, the 'explaining/understanding' problem propelled further internal divisions, allowing both marginalizations and methodological cross-fertilization, particularly in the less 'contextually' oriented parts capitalizing 'Science' in social science. Generally, specialization was welcomed.

If the optimism about the fully self-transparent, rational society had given way to the more sober scepticism of the post-war era, the positive lesson was that the attempt to construct a unified knowledge system to 'end them all' was a foolish and unrealistic aspiration as well as politically dangerous, and hence undesirable. Specialization and an increasing division of labour promised incremental advances in diverse knowledge areas, a potential for *some* pluralism, and hence a hedging against undue aggrandisement.

If this described roughly where we are now, we could end on the happy note of a pluralistic community of social scientists of many voices, outlooks and analytics within a choir of scientists preoccupied with other knowledge domains.

Unfortunately, I don't think happy pluralism *is* where we are, though. There are a number of reasons for this, and many have to do with the very division of labour itself. Increasing specialization has led to a proliferation of knowledge, but also to a proliferation of the idioms within which respective knowledge domains are constituted. This is not a problem so long as experts within a field work amongst themselves, and, on the basis of shared constitutive assumptions, vocabularies, and professional standards, produce knowledge incrementally. Testimony to just how efficacious and generally acceptable this conception of academic knowledge production is, can be found in the fact that in itself it has generated an academic sub-discipline, in the 'Sociology of Science'. Belonging to an epistemic community in this strong sense, however, raises problems in negotiating the boundaries within which such knowledge accumulation projects are maintained. The "norming force" of facticity within such approaches becomes, all too easily, an unreflectively taken-for-granted, shadowing all that has always been pernicious in 'positivism': By no longer carrying an active memory of the condition of its formation, the participant reproducers of such kinds of knowledge fields risk producing dogmas, reinforced rising mutual unintelligibility *vis-à-vis* what would be cognate disciplines. Now, all this is generally true of any knowledge field. But I want to suggest that it has particularly pernicious consequences in the social sciences, and their cognate disciplines.

Before pursuing this thought a bit further, I want to take a brief detour, in order to connect the story I have been exploring so far more directly with some of the more frequently commented on current trends in the higher education sector. Higher education has undergone a series of changes in recent decades, which, despite being quite differential across various national contexts, bear out, at least to some extent, the talk of the emergence of a global higher education industry. Viewed over a relatively short period of time, the convergences are quite extraordinary; the internationalization of league-tables, the emergence (if still not quite the unification) of generally interoperable performance indicators, the similarities in the formulations of sector specific strategic objectives, and not least the consolidation of English as the dominant *lingua franca* of higher education, has made ours one sector in which talk of globalization makes, *prima facie*, perfect sense. Equally within a global trend is the agenda to increase graduate intake, and to create greater efficiencies in the sector by tightening curricula, and by using competition-based mechanisms.

This process has its detractors, who are mostly disgruntled academics, and left-wing student activists, whose reaction to the involvement of business with *anything* is an oppositional reflex. It has, however, overwhelming backing among politicians, University administrations, and the business community. Lord Mandelson's latest foray into reinventing University teaching along the lines of customer relations, despite its role as a 'red herring', articulates at the very least a wide-spread consensus among reformers, whose only motivation is avowedly to ensure that Universities provide value for money. Debate over this, insofar as it happens, is today widely framed as a contest between progressives, who are looking to make degrees work for wider social and economic benefits, and 'stuckists' who cling on to overcome ideals of ivory tower elitism, unaccountability, and disrespect for students, and their requirements.

I don't want to spend any time reconstructing this debate, but instead would like to pull a few trends out from under the general hype, which, I think, link us back

to our concern with the consolidation of ‘knowledge silos’ and ‘Somebody Else’s Problem’. At one step’s remove, the main shift in the *governance* of higher education, and its consolidation has been epistemological. League-tables, performance targets, and the reporting regimes aimed at enhancing transparency and accountability betray, methodologically, a staggering belief on the part of reformers, in the idea that substantive objectives can be achieved by orienting and managing towards (numerical) targets. In an extraordinary success story for (parts of) the social sciences, ‘evidence based’ policy making, which pervades many government sectors, but also provides the communicative currency of inter-changes between private and public actors, today supplies the bedrock of decision-making. This is extraordinary, because in the social sciences more generally, epistemological and methodological debates of the past 25 years have produced a much more ‘measured’ approach to mediating between qualitative and quantitative methods than the almost unequivocal endorsement of quantitative indicators and targets in contemporary governance suggests. It would, I think, be worthwhile to investigate to what extent this development is linked to the increasing entrenchment of private consultancy services in governance and public management, particularly since the advice currently rolled out in this context is very similar to what was implemented (and subsequently often revoked) in the private sector in the 1980s. Be that as it may, though, there are real problems attached to the fetishization of quantifiable indicators and targets.

Let me raise this briefly, not through a discussion of methodological, conceptual, or practical limits to the use of indicators or targets in decision making, but rather through a general example which, I think, speaks more directly to our concern with higher education. The orientation to targets is, of course, nothing new to us as learners. From elementary education, we become accustomed to having at least aspects of our performance as students expressed in numerical code; receiving grades allowed us to develop a sense of how we were doing comparatively to our peers, whereas good marking would alert us to the weaker parts of our knowledge acquisition process, and identify areas in which we may need further work, or even support. The current focus on results in education, on accountability, benchmarking, and comparative standard setting thus simply takes an already existing set of practices, unifies them, provides mechanisms for more transparency, and hence lays claim to enhancing accountability. There is another side to the learner story, though; one which we are all keenly aware of as well. There are the instances, when we got good results, but only much later realized, how patchy, unconsolidated, tentative, and preliminary our knowledge was at that point, and how short of any sense of having, as it was once put, ‘command’ of the subject in question. This experience of a disjuncture between the review mechanism’s accredited results for our work, on the one hand, and our sense of having understood the material in question *substantively* and *sufficiently* on the other, is frequent, and constitutive. It links to other ‘messy’ bits in learning. Consider, for instance, ‘risk-taking’. As a lecturer, I frequently come across essays, in which a student tries their hand at a really huge, difficult, and, basically, unmanageable topic, having tweaked the question so as to be able to develop a broad-sweep approach. Now, of course there typically are some real errors in such undertakings, missed literatures, misapprehended arguments, and selective appropriation of facts perhaps most common among these. As a result, the student is unlikely to score first class results for such work. From a ‘learning’ perspective, however, the ‘unmeasured’ side-effects of such risk-taking behaviour are often invaluable. Having tried on one’s own, so to speak, even with inferior results (where

these are marks), provides an opportunity for self-reflection not in the same way available through the grading system. I'd wager the guess that, in some measure, we can find such experiences throughout our respective biographies as learners, and their significance for our intellectual developments is intuitively obvious.

This example serves me to highlight the real imbalance introduced by the focus on indicators and targets. I can, of course, teach my class so as to increase 'high' pass rates, thus satisfying a demand for evidence of learning outcomes. But I can do this without actually paying much attention to whether these outcomes reflect competency *vis-à-vis* the knowledge field in question, where competency would mean more than just an ability to accurately repeat canonical 'truths'. From a perspective driven in such a way by *substantive* concerns, the contemporary obsession with the numerics of excellence rankings, measurable learning outcomes, and research excellence scores suggests only relatively marginal potential benefits, while posing enormous risks by providing false, or even perverse incentives. Perhaps the easiest way to gauge the extent of the problem, is to ask the question of what 'rewards' there are for joined-up thinking, and the consistent development and improvement of one's critical faculties. It is not that these virtues are actively decried by 'reformers' and the consultancies they deploy, but they can only register as beneficial indirectly: For instance, a great departmental research culture (lively visiting scholars programme, constructive culture of debate, high levels of collegiality, and capacities to collaborate across epistemological and methodological positions) *may* register indirectly as a positive factor by driving a School's research profile upwards. But if you can achieve the same 'upwards' trajectory by increasing the pressure on individual staff to crank up their research output, you might as well do that, since collegiality and constructive workplace relations are not only difficult to achieve, and often highly contingent, but also time consuming, difficult to verify, and generative of suspicions regarding 'collectives' more generally. Insofar as (few) Schools still achieve something like a good departmental research culture, they do so *despite* the contemporary managerial model, not because of any facilitation through, or by it.

How does this intersect with our exposition above of the "Somebody Else's Problem" problem, and the run through the formation of the disciplinary division of labour? When we take the gradual emergence of discrete disciplinary knowledge spheres as a problem in its own right, we get an immediate sense of why the 'happy pluralism' which *could* be the condition of disciplinary division of labour won't fly. I have, already, cryptically alluded to the thought that the problem is worse for social scientists than for everyone else. Here is why. Having established a range of different disciplines, with different knowledge constitutive interests, and having developed relatively well consolidated matrices of methodological, epistemological, and theoretical preliminaries, social scientists face up to one distinctive problem, no matter in which discipline they operate: How are the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge maintained? Successful answers to this problem would enable the division of labour to be transparent. We would know what kinds of questions the respective social science is trying to answer, and which ones not. Instead, the social sciences have a vexing tendency to run up against what used to be called *philosophical* problems, which, on closer inspection, have much more in common *across* the different disciplines, and hence pose questions for the discreteness model of the disciplinary division of labour. Again, I want to pick just one example to suggest what I mean here. Take, for instance, the problem of methodological individualism. Most

social science disciplines have, within their own respective idioms, developed methodological individualist accounts of their problem fields. Whether in economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, or political science (to name just a few), there are successful research programs built out of methodological individualist building blocks, and they often generate ‘sub-fields’. Now, these projects can, following the problem-solving approach so often attributed to the natural scientists, engage in progressive internal differentiation, reinforcing the division of labour at a sub-disciplinary level. But the social world is not a laboratory, and our attempts to reproduce the strictures of experimental science within its realm always precarious and subject to limitations. Methodological individualist approaches, in either of the disciplinary contexts mentioned above, share the problem of *how* to account for the individual as their constitutive unit of inquiry. We know this, for instance, from the context of debates about the explanatory value of rational choice approaches, which eventually would always lead back to questions about the ‘chooser’, as well as about the contexts in which choices arise *for* choosers. If you thought this was confined to arcane debates in the notoriously messier parts of the social sciences, such as political science, international relations, or political theory and philosophy, just spare a thought for psychologists, who have more recently seen parts of their research constituency leave the ‘ego-logical’ premises of the past decades behind, in favour of attempts to get at questions of group identities, and the ‘intersubjective’ dimensions of self-formation and self-deformation.

This, and other, similarly common problems in the social sciences have a tendency to re-occur, and often do so unexpectedly, if never in strictly the same form or idiom as before. They also have a tendency to reach, as it were, right through the knowledge constitutive boundaries erected via the disciplinary division of labour. When this happens (as, I think, it does right now), the mutually exclusive languages with which disciplinary knowledge construction often operates in the context of maintaining these boundaries towards other disciplines, become prime sources of obstruction. Nowhere, I think, is this more obvious than when taking a closer look at the discipline of IR.

International Relations, the ‘late’ social science, has struggled for a disciplinary identity since its inception. Its proponents borrowed liberally from various other disciplines, with history, sociology, political theory, and economics only the most obvious sources. Where the quest for distinction took on a life of its own, however, IR, the academic pursuit, has frequently displayed a tendency towards highly idiosyncratic appropriations of such borrowed sources. Thus, for example, a casual glance at contemporary debates in constructivist IR about the role of ‘norms’ in world politics will readily reveal that such debates proceed, by and large, without even an advanced level undergraduate appreciation of elementary political philosophy. Methodologically, norms are instead accounted for in accordance with (mostly equally crude) sociological precepts (i.e. they are treated as social facts, without raising the question of their substantive genesis). In distinction to most sociologists, however, IR theorists will operate without any sense of the limitations of such accounts, or a sense of systematic awareness of where these might run into problems.

Here, we find ourselves in the presence of Douglas Adams’ SEP. Defending a research program like the (mainstream) constructivist one in IR by deferring certain problems to other disciplines, conveniently shores up distinctiveness, and any chances of establishing research program uniqueness and identification among other

disciplinary contexts. ‘Normative theory’ proper, is somebody else’s problem, and our explanations and analyses do not depend for their validity-claims on substantive contributions from it, or them.

The tendency to think in those terms is reinforced by the monitoring and performance-measuring culture I have sketched in the interlude above. After a few years of lip-service towards the need for more inter-disciplinary research, the reality that has emerged has comprehensively belied any such sentiments. What used to be the RAE (the acronyms keep changing, if not the substantive ideas), willy-nilly reinforced disciplinary boundary maintenance; just think of how many properly trans-disciplinary journals you know that are ranked highly. The incentives are high for identifying very closely with disciplinary mainstream ideas. Breaking into ‘top journals’ is more frequently an exercise in second-guessing and meeting the methodological and epistemological premises of the influential members of editorial boards, than it is about constructing a good, well supported case for the research problem in question.

These reinforcements of disciplinary identity politics today become more and more entrenched. SEP, the rendering invisible of the elephant in the room, the spacecraft on the cricket ground, or the social/political problem or logic that you didn’t expect to encounter in your research, is becomes a career preserving defence mechanism. As memories shorten, transdisciplinary literacy declines, and the research success formula becomes ever more closely tied to quantities of output and exposure of public profiles, the incentives rise to develop a light touch, skimming off bits of past research and work in other disciplines suitably poorly mainstreamed in one’s own in order to crank up the output. “Somebody Else’s Problem” can thus be made endogenous on the premise that it really is and looks different in one’s own disciplinary context, absolving both author and reader to engage with its roots, legacies, and constitutive debates and disagreements.

Now, I have painted a bleak picture about higher education, research, and the status quo in the social sciences, and as such Jeremiads go, they are always over the top. The launch of a journal like this one, I think, demonstrates comprehensively that the disciplining of disciplines in terms of disciplinary identities is unlikely to carry the day in the long run. Rather like Douglas Adams’ characters, who get to ‘glimpse’ the spacecraft in the cricket ground through elaborate dances, awkward movements and perspective shifts, participants in an interdisciplinary dialogue such as the one anticipated and actively promoted by *Global Discourse* and its committed editorial team, stand a real chance to defy the logic of “Somebody Else’s Problem”. In the greater scheme of things, I think that the current phase in what can only be euphemistically called ‘higher education policy’ will be looked at as an over-the-top aberration. A global financial crisis, the challenge of climate change, and the inter-linkages between these and problems of ‘development’ show up contexts in which the maintenance of the SEP approach, and any sense of an uncritical sustenance of disciplinary normalcy look quite silly very quickly. There may be increasing pressures against intellectual risk taking, and towards the stream-lining of particularly PhD research, seemingly imposing severe limitations on candidates’ capacities to stray sidewise, to let themselves be guided by curiosity, and to engage with strange, unfamiliar idioms, ideas, and perspectives. But, at least in my experience, and borne out by initiatives such as this journal, the spirit of defiance and the appetite for critical thought, reflective analysis, and contestation is alive and well within current cohorts

of PhD candidates and recent graduates. A good thing too, since neither of the crises contexts mentioned should warrant the idea that we would have been better off with *less* critical thinking!

My purpose in engaging with the SEP problem, and the risks of disciplinary retrenchment has been to highlight some real problems facing all of us, whether undergraduates interested in research, PHD candidates, or professionals in the higher education context. All of us will make compromises in the current climate (some perhaps more so than others), which may involve publishing something one knows is at best ‘half-baked’, getting away with poorly prepared teaching, or perhaps by withdrawing from a debate one should be involved in for reasons of economising time. My plea with this contribution would be to not let this lead to a discouragement and eventual submergence of our capacities to ‘jump around’ awkwardly, shift our perspectives, and glimpse what goes on behind the veils of SEPs. This journal looks set to provide an excellent forum for doing exactly that sort of thing, keeping all of us on our toes by stretching our imaginaries and confronting us with unfamiliar, but nonetheless cogent problems, arguments, and insights. In this context, many of the concerns I alluded to above will make continued re-occurrences; the explaining/understanding divide, which can show up also in the constellation of ‘participation’ vs. ‘observation’; the problems of structure and agency, with methodological holism vs. individualism as another code; empirical challenges, for instance such as those posed by social integration on the back of political fragmentation (we have a socially produced *global* environmental problem, and an *international* political architecture). There are, of course, many more not explored (think of questions of identity and difference, whether in narrower, or in global settings). The quality of our scholarship will ultimately depend on our capacity and willingness to let ourselves be confounded by what we encounter when we ‘jump around’ to catch glimpses of SEPs, and by our mutual efforts in encouraging each other to keep up the practice. *Global Discourse* is well conceived as a forum where both can be achieved.