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Different Realities: Academics, Politics, and International Relations

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Abstract: Since the conception of International Relations (IR) as an academic discipline it has been characterized by prodigious interaction between academics and practitioners with the former often spending time in the policy arena before focusing on pedagogy. While a high level of interchange is held to be a defining characteristic of the American system, concern has been growing that there is an ever-widening gap between academics and practitioners and between theory and practice. Responding to the danger of a ‘me-cleaver-you-stupid’ form of theoretical and academic superiority, William Wallace conjectured his view of academic “semi-detachment”. In spite of a long history of government-academy co-operation, many social scientists are becoming increasingly removed from the world of policy and action. This essay demonstrates that despite the subsequent criticisms levelled at Wallace, his general line of argumentation provides valuable insight into assuming a more useful and positive trajectory not only for scholars within the discipline but for the very field of IR itself.

Keywords: Academia, American system, balance, gap, discipline, international relations theory, meta-theory, self-enclosure, self-reflection

According to Thomas G. Mahnken, “The government and the academy are engaged in an awkward courtship.”¹ While the discipline of International Relations (IR) emerged after the First World War, IR scholars sought to confront, engage and resolve the egregious problems of the world.² These objectives are still said to resonate with IR scholars today but have undergone a significant change since the end of the Second

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12 Thomas G. Mahnken, “Bridging the Gap Between the Worlds of Ideas and Actions,” *Orbis* 54.1 (2010), 4.

2 Ken Booth, “Dare not to Know: International Relations Theory versus the Future,” *International Relations Theory Today*, eds. Ken Booth and Steve Smith (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 341. See also, William Wallace, “Truth and Power, Monks and Technocrats: Theory and Practice in International Relations,” *Review of International Studies* 22 (1996), 301-2.

World War.³ Since 1945, scholars more inclined to pursue policy-relevant research have called for other scholars in general to produce research that is of greater practical use to those in government sectors. Today, IR is seemingly engrossed in self-reflection and centering chiefly on academic debates between proponents of the various approaches to international relations theory.⁴ While many political science professionals are undertaking deep reflection on their field of scholarly inquiry, they are discussing the growing problems that are now being regarded as a potential crisis.

Indeed, many of the scholarly controversies have been seen as leading us into some serious and catastrophically misguided policy choices in the contemporary system. IR, like other social sciences, has tended to perpetuate an ideological separation of “man” and “scholar,” viewing the world of global politics as somehow removed from reason beyond the institutions upon which it takes place. William Wallace has responded to this debate by conceiving the view of “semi-detachment” for the academic, and urging those within the discipline to re-engage with communities beyond academia while simultaneously “[maintaining] a certain distance.”⁵ This essay shows that despite the subsequent criticisms aimed at Wallace, his general line of argumentation provides valuable insight into, and presents an appropriate and most positive trajectory for the field of international relations and those operating soundly within it.

From its inception, this relatively new academic discipline was characterized by a high level of interaction between academics and practitioners with the former often spending time in the policy arena prior to focusing on pedagogy.⁶ In the United States, in particular, a profound rate of scholarly and intellectual transaction is argued to remain a defining characteristic of this system.⁷ Nevertheless, there is growing concern across the field of IR regarding the widening-gap between academics and practitioners⁸ and between theory and practice.⁹ Joseph Lepgold and Miroslav Nincic

3 Keith Webb, “Academics and Professionals in International Relations: A British Perception,” *Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy-Making: National Perspectives on Academics and Professionals in International Relations*, eds. Michel Girard et al. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 84.

4 Barry Buzan, and Richard Little, “Why International Relations has Failed as an Intellectual Project and What to Do About It,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 30.1 (2001), 31-2.

5 William Wallace, “Truth and Power, Monks and Technocrats: Theory and Practice in International Relations,” *Review of International Studies* 22 (1996), 317, 321.

6 *Ibid.*, 318 and 319.

7 James N. Rosenau, and Burton M. Sapin, “Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy-Making: Academics and Practitioners – the American Experience,” *Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy-Making: National Perspectives on Academics and Professionals in International Relations*, eds. Michel Girard et al. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 127.

8 Joseph Lepgold, and Miroslav Nincic, *Beyond the Ivory Tower: International Relations Theory and the Issue of Policy Relevance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 3.

9 Joseph Lepgold, “Policy Relevance and Theoretical Development in International Relations: What Have We Learned?” *Being Useful: Policy Relevance and International Relations Theory*, eds. Miroslav Nincic and Joseph Lepgold (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 367.

argue that this gap has been developing for some time.¹⁰ While some find this development troubling, others are growing increasingly frustrated and concerned that academics are becoming *too* involved in the realm of policy.¹¹

In a review of the literature on the theory and practice of IR, Wallace argues that academics have come to place an excessive degree of emphasis on theory over practice.¹² Consequently, academics have separated themselves from the realm of policy, promoting self-enclosure within the Ivory Tower of academia.¹³ The current gap between the world of practice and the world of ideas exists, according to Mahnken, for three distinct reasons:

The current gap between the government and the academy exists and is undesirable, for three reasons. First, the distance between the academy and the government denies the government, and ultimately the people of the United States, expertise that can facilitate better decisions. This is particularly apparent in the study of foreign cultures and societies. The disciplines that possess greatest insight in these areas—sociology and anthropology—have been particularly hostile to cooperation with government. Second, the gap hurts the scholarly community by producing impoverished theory because it is detached and abstract in the extreme. Finally, the divorce of theory from practice hurts students who, as citizens, have a vital role to play in the practice of U.S. democracy.¹⁴

The discipline has become self-abnegating and scholastic, rather than scholarly and engaged,¹⁵ a view held not only by Wallace.¹⁶ Some assert that academics have seemingly neglected their responsibility of “[speaking] truth to power” and instead are only talking to each other.¹⁷ This raises several pressing question about the efficacy of academics and their relationships with others operating within the world system. Should political scientists spend more time interacting and engaging with the people they write about? Should political scientists bother making their work more

10 Levgold and Ninci, Op. cit., 13.

11 Christopher Hill, and Pamela Beshoff, “The Two Worlds: Natural Partnership or Necessary Distance?” *Two Worlds of International Relations: Academics, Practitioners and the Trade in Ideas*, eds. Christopher Hill and Pamela Beshoff (New York: Routledge, 1994), 212.

12 Wallace, Op. cit., 304.

13 Ibid.

14 Thomas G. Mahnken, “Bridging the Gap Between the Worlds of Ideas and Actions,” *Orbis* 54.1 (2010), 8.

15 Ibid., 314.

16 Joseph Levgold, and Miroslav Nincic, *Beyond the Ivory Tower: International Relations Theory and the Issue of Policy Relevance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 7.

17 William Wallace, “Truth and Power, Monks and Technocrats: Theory and Practice in International Relations,” *Review of International Studies* 22 (1996), 305.

accessible to scholars in other fields, as well as individuals beyond academic institutions? As part of his effort to redress the imbalance, Wallace calls for a greater emphasis on empirical work and of testing the theories put forth by the academic community, lest international relations become “preoccupied with theory for its own sake rather than as a means to explanation.”¹⁸ The proper relationship is thus one of balance between theory and practice and one of semi-detachment for the academic.¹⁹ It is up to academics on an individual basis to determine how to best achieve that balance.²⁰

Wallace’s argument provides answers to questions concerning fundamental concepts in the field of international relations. In addressing the nature of the relationship between the academic and practitioner, Wallace answers questions regarding the purposes of, and the relationship between, theory and policy. Simply put, “[t]he main functions of theory are to explain and predict.”²¹ This desire for theory to explain underlies Wallace’s work. It can help not only by presenting an understanding of the world but also by informing policy by providing “beliefs about what results a decision taken in the present is likely to produce in the future.”²² However, the relationship between theory and policy is not asymmetric but, rather, inter-dependent. Theory and policy, as regarded by Joseph Leggold and Miroslav Nincic, is a “two-way street.”²³ Both contend that theory informs policy and the practice in turn shapes theory.²⁴

Steve Smith vociferously criticizes Wallace on various points with respect to the relationships under discussion. Smith asserts that Wallace “misrepresents the relationship between theory and policy.”²⁵ For Smith, these are not separate but rather

18 Ibid., 314. This view is shared equally by Joseph Leggold and Miroslav Nincic who argue that “the academic emphasis has shifted too far toward work with little relevance outside academia.” Joseph Leggold, and Miroslav Nincic, *Beyond the Ivory Tower: International Relations Theory and the Issue of Policy Relevance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 7.

19 William Wallace, “Truth and Power, Monks and Technocrats: Theory and Practice in International Relations,” *Review of International Studies* 22 (1996), 317. Keith Webb also calls for the engagement of social scientists with policymakers but cautions against scholars becoming “pseudo-decision-maker[s].” Keith Webb, “Academics and Practitioners: Power, Knowledge and Role.” *Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy-Making: National Perspectives on Academics and Professionals in International Relations*, eds. Michel Girard et al. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 14.

20 Wallace, Op. cit., 318.

21 Joseph Leggold, and Miroslav Nincic, *Beyond the Ivory Tower: International Relations Theory and the Issue of Policy Relevance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 89.

22 Fred Chernoff, *The Power of International Theory: Reforging the Link to Foreign Policy-Making Through Scientific Enquiry*, eds. Barry Buzan and Richard Little (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1.

23 Leggold and Nincic, Op. cit., 25.

24 Stephen Walt, “The Relationship Between Theory and Policy in International Relations,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 8 (2005), 29.

25 Steve Smith, “Power and Truth: A Reply to William Wallace,” *Review of International Studies* 23 (1997), 514.

“inexorably intertwined”, as “practice is unavoidably theoretical.”²⁶ Transcending Wallace, he regards theory and policy as constituting one whole, rather than separate spheres in need of reconnection.²⁷ However, Smith’s view is problematic on two counts. Firstly, theorists are not explicitly engaged in practice, though some often cross the divide to do so.²⁸ They constitute a constellation in their own right. Secondly, while certain theories may implicitly guide policymakers, as noted by Smith, these may be attributed to the theorists in the realm of academia as “[p]olicymakers, after all, attended college in the society [...] [and] read its textbooks.”²⁹ Explicit theory is often ignored outright by policymakers, many of them disdainful of the jargon and verbosity that permeates much of the theoretical literature.³⁰ This lends credence to Wallace’s assertion that the field has become too scholastic.

Policy has tuned-out theory. However, the theoretical apparatus has been largely misinterpreted and misrepresented by many in the policymaking realm. The heuristic devices of the academic community are not capable of performing miracles. Practitioners, already constrained by factors such as time in their decision-making, display an overt unwillingness to engage with the material presented by their academic counterparts. When they do engage, in some cases they may not even be able to understand it.³¹ Perhaps, those unable to understand the complete range of theories put forward by scholars are more so *unwilling* to understand the imaginative and innovative quality of academic material.

Smith further criticizes Wallace for pushing theories as being “there to help deal with policy dilemmas.”³² Wallace has called for increasing policy-relevance and has warned academics of “theory for its own sake.”³³ While Smith is concerned with

26 Ibid., 515.

27 Wallace is not alone in his effort to reconnect the two spheres. Stephen Walt cites a growing body of literature that aims to do much the same. Stephen Walt, “The Relationship Between Theory and Policy in International Relations,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 8 (2005), 24.

28 James N. Rosenau, and Burton M. Sapin, “Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy-Making: Academics and Practitioners – the American Experience,” *Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy-Making: National Perspectives on Academics and Professionals in International Relations*, eds. Michel Girard et al. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 126.

29 Ibid., 128.

30 Joseph Leggold, “Policy Relevance and Theoretical Development in International Relations: What Have We Learned?” *Being Useful: Policy Relevance and International Relations Theory*, eds. Miroslav Nincic and Joseph Leggold (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 366. Stephen Walt furthers this point in writing that there is not much “evidence that policy makers pay systematic attention to academic writings on international affairs.” Stephen Walt, “The Relationship Between Theory and Policy in International Relations,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 8 (2005), 24.

31 Stephen Walt, “The Relationship Between Theory and Policy in International Relations,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 8 (2005), 38.

32 Steve Smith, “Power and Truth: A Reply to William Wallace,” *Review of International Studies* 23 (1997), 515.

33 William Wallace, “Truth and Power, Monks and Technocrats: Theory and Practice in International Relations,” *Review of International Studies* 22 (1996), 314.

making something more policy relevant, academics are taking the point of view of the policymakers and failing to advance the cause of the have-nots of society. Smith fails to consider the point that theory which does not explain is not beneficial to those for whom he agitates.³⁴ There are two good reasons why he should pay closer attention to this issue: firstly, abstract theory is ignored by many, save a few academics and, secondly, theory with explanatory power can help serve those without political power by explaining why this is the case and how people can become empowered.

For Wallace, one can engage with policymakers while simultaneously “[speaking] truth to power” and criticizing constructively through a position of semi-detachment.³⁵ Smith does not believe that this is possible. Instead, he reasons that policymakers will ignore criticism and maintains that they will only listen if they believe it suits their purposes.³⁶ Ken Booth is equally sceptical, writing in his response to Wallace “that the Galileos of this world never get invited to working lunches by popes.”³⁷ However, even if Galileo was never able to enter into casual social engagements with bishops or the Vicar of Christ, one can safely argue that his ideas had profound, lasting reverberations. It seems peculiar that Smith would argue in this fashion given his defence of a broader purpose of theory. Experience explicates in a near-schematic form that a connection between academics and non-academics alike *can* be fruitfully achieved. At certain periods in time power listens to truth, while at others it does not, but that does not mean one should avoid injecting new ideas into public discourse. The purpose of the academic is to engage with the world irrespective of whether or not audiences heed their advice. It is surely better than the alternative inasmuch as “speak[ing] truth in secret only to each other” as Wallace succinctly states.³⁸

Attached to the aforementioned criticism is concern with what Smith believes is a restricted view of politics which focuses exclusively on policymakers and politicians, and equal unease with the notion that the academic is responsible in some way to the state.³⁹ These concerns stem from a narrow reading of Wallace’s argument. While it is true that one of the limitations of Wallace’s analysis is that it explicitly restricts itself to the policy arena, Wallace’s general criticism of academics shutting the doors of the Ivory Tower can be applied to a world beyond the policymaking community. Academics can be engaged not only with policymakers but also with those who are involved in the “massive area of political activity that is not focused on the electoral and policy-making processes.”⁴⁰ The problem is that the academics have

34 Smith, Op. cit., 513.

35 Wallace, Op. cit., 305.

36 Smith, Op. cit., 512.

37 Ken Booth, “Discussion: A Reply to Wallace.” *Review of International Studies* 23 (1997), 373.

38 Wallace, Op. cit., 305.

39 Smith, Op. cit., 508-510.

40 Steve Smith, “Power and Truth: A Reply to William Wallace,” *Review of International Studies* 23 (1997), 508.

found themselves behind the monastic walls and cannot engage with policymakers, let alone others who fall outside the traditional area of political activity. Accordingly, academics have responsibility not just to the state and policy, but also to the students they teach as well as to the public at large.⁴¹ A disservice is evident to all when academics turn to scholasticism and seclusion. Even Smith concedes the point that academics should “strengthen civil society” though he remains doubtful that the responsibility extends to “[training] our students to understand and operate in the world of politics and policy.”⁴² However, Wallace is neither calling for students to be unthinking instruments of the state, nor for international relations departments to become little more than “contract research consultancies” or training schools for diplomats.⁴³ Wallace is calling for students and academics to understand and act critically within the world.

Though Wallace provides a cogent argument and a solution to the issues concerning IR as a field of scholarly inquiry, he does not provide any practical suggestions as to how to achieve the desired outcome. Rather, he leaves academics to address the situation on an individual basis. Practical steps do exist and have been proffered by academics studying the very same problem. Leggold and Nincic lay some of the blame with the academic incentive structures which discourage engagement, as “the professional status of academics depends mainly on how their work is received by fellow scholars, rather than by those outside of the Ivory Tower.”⁴⁴ The system discourages semi-detachment and encourages monasticism and scholasticism when it could foster engagement by measuring academics’ “professional prestige at least partly in terms of how seriously their ideas are applied outside the academy.”⁴⁵ Stephen Walt has also recognized the current structure as problematic, positing a series of suggestions which include encouraging newer faculty members to become involved in the policy community.⁴⁶ Walt points out that they often fail to become involved in this way because it impedes upon their ultimate acquisition of tenure.⁴⁷ Mahnken expresses a similar sentiment, when he writes:

Although the government has taken commendable steps to begin bridging the gap with academia, structural barriers to greater collaboration remain. Professors, particularly those seeking tenure, are reluctant to leave campus for

41 William Wallace, “Truth and Power, Monks and Technocrats: Theory and Practice in International Relations,” *Review of International Studies* 22 (1996), 305.

42 Smith, Op. cit., 510.

43 Wallace, Op. cit., 318.

44 Joseph Leggold, and Miroslav Nincic, *Beyond the Ivory Tower: International Relations Theory and the Issue of Policy Relevance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 15.

45 Ibid., 14.

46 Stephen Walt, “The Relationship Between Theory and Policy in International Relations,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 8 (2005), 42.

47 Ibid.

government service and generally shy away from identification with a particular administration. Conversely, the rapid pace of decision making, secrecy, and the complexities of bringing in outside advisors make it difficult for those in government to turn to experts from the academy. The academy would be well advised to bolster the ethic of responsibility and public service among its members.⁴⁸

While such suggestions are also frustratingly left in the hands of the academics with the expectation that they will act collectively, the proposal put forth by Walt demonstrates a practical and concrete approach to addressing the problem.

Although Wallace's general argument make a useful suggestion for the discipline of international relations, the proposals of Stephen Walt, Joseph Lepgold and Miroslav Nincic represent concrete strategies to enable the discipline to reconnect the worlds of policy and action, and to begin moving cautiously in a positive direction. The fact that an intense debate over the relationship between academic and practitioner exists lends further credence to Wallace's view that the academic community has relegated itself to a position of isolation.⁴⁹

Consonant with Wallace's over-arching assertions about the need to open the doors to higher-education, IR and other scholarly programs would benefit a great deal if academics were to focus their efforts on designing and developing retention programs at universities and colleges. Academics have the potential to produce tailor-made programs which lead the development of IR theorists and specialists who would ultimately seek a reasonable transition into the constellation of policy-making and practice from the beginning of their studies. Although the issue subsequently raised is whether or not academics are in the "business" of producing policy-makers or future academics, the development of *ad hoc* programs, including tutorials, mentoring programs, skills workshops, and social support services in either a professional or academic dynamic could very well serve the needs of both sides.

Academics carry responsibilities for the promulgation of quality in all academic activities, whether they be pedagogy, research, community engagement and, indeed, policy development. Students, in particular, would benefit from the integration of these activities and, in particular, from exposure to the practice of politics, not an exponential exposure to the world of theories and meta-theories. Work experience programs, co-op programs, as well as internships and placements may be designed to meld the theoretical and practical aspects of politics. When education fails, or falls short, at such a critical juncture, then society as a whole suffers by receiving a smaller pool of individuals capable of engaging with the various issues which affect world politics. It is the job of academics to bridge the academic and policy making communities, to use theory and understandings of history, as fundamental mechanisms to narrow the gap between theoretical discourse and political practice.

4849 Thomas G. Mahnken, "Bridging the Gap Between the Worlds of Ideas and Actions," *Orbis* 54.1 (2010), 12.

49 William Wallace, "Truth and Power, Monks and Technocrats: Theory and Practice in International Relations," *Review of International Studies* 22 (1996), 321.

As the actions of humans have always been, and always will be, anchored in their interpretations of their world, academics serve a dual purpose. International relations scholars 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.”⁵⁰ To achieve this end, IR must move away from the world of abstraction and gravitate increasingly towards the world of practice.

50 Steve Smith, “Power and Truth: A Reply to William Wallace,” *Review of International Studies* 23 (1997), 507.