TITLE: Revisiting the Theory and Practice Debate in International Relations and Foreign Policy and

an Idea for a Joint Venture

AUTHORS: Yönet Can Tezel

PAGES: 65-76

ORIGINAL PDF URL: https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/147457

Revisiting the Theory and Practice Debate in International Relations and Foreign Policy and an Idea for a Joint Venture

Yönet C. Tezel*

Abstract

The relationship between theory and practice in international relations and foreign policy has been addressed by many on both sides. Despite helpful observations, the exploration has not produced much in the way of conclusive outcomes. This result is not surprising given the fact the theory-practice debate in foreign affairs is inevitably associated with the broader debate about how to properly study organized political/social life when focusing on the role of culture, structure, and choice in international relations. Although juxtaposing the theoretical study of international relations and foreign policy against the practice of foreign/international policy has its discipline-specific traits, it cannot be divorced from the larger ontological and epistemological debates. This essay reminds the reader of several facets of the narrower debate as it relates to the broader one and offers a perspective and ensuing observations from a 'part taker' in foreign policy. The essay also includes an idea for a research project that could be used to help overcome some of the putative shortcomings of the field.

Keywords: theory and practice, international relations, foreign policy making

1. Introduction

When studying political science and international relations as an undergraduate aspiring to become a diplomat, I had developed in my mind an image of a book that I looked forward to gaining access to once I joined the foreign service. This book would comprise, as realist theory had inspired me to believe, a list of "dos and don'ts" in foreign policy according to clearly defined elements of national interest, and would guide me in my professional life. After more than two decades in the service, I joke to young colleagues that I am still in search of that book. No such book exists, nor could it, at least in today's world. I have been privy to confidential documents that aimed to provide general courses of action on key foreign policy areas, but the world is always changing, and the scope and context of the decisions that needed to be made proliferated continuously. Those secret documents were too general and quickly became obsolete, losing their relevance for everyday policy making. (Things might have been somewhat different in the strait-jacketed years of the Cold War.)

While still new in the service I also vowed to remember the theory courses I took at university, hoping that knowledge would be another useful guide in the world of practice. This proved to be a difficult promise to keep. Still, later in my occasional returns to theory,

* Yönet Can Tezel is Deputy Director-General for Research in the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The views expressed in this essay belong to the author and do not represent the position of the Ministry.

I realized that theory too is in flux, and hence hardly a referential guide for everyday use, despite the breath of intellectual fresh air it offers. The diplomatic/bureaucratic routine, usually more hectic than dull, which is formed around the everyday life of practice in the ministry and diplomatic missions abroad de-mistifies the object of theory in the eyes of the practitioner. Still, the possibility of testing the relevance and validity of theory against one's practical experience presents a challenge, hopefully perceived worthy of pursuit for the interested practitioner. After years of occasional contemplation, at times part of academic endeavours, I still have many unanswered questions about, and some disappointments in, the toolbox of theory we use to make sense of international relations (IR) and of how foreign policy decisions are made.

This inconclusiveness might also be observed from academia, reflected in the ongoing intra-discipline debates and the continuing search for better theory, and may be why some aspiring scholars take up the challenge of choosing IR as their preferred discipline. If the above is true, now may be a good time for a joint venture: a research program involving practitioners *and* theoreticians to harness the interest on both sides for a better understanding of the world and our ways of dealing with it. As my rationale for such a research project, I will devote much of this essay to remembering the theory-practice debate in its various manifestations.

2. Reintroducing the Debate: Theory versus/and Practice

Although I, like many others, believe the theory and practice debate relates very much to the meta-theoretical debates in the social sciences, including the discipline of IR, this association was not obvious for many (at least in the analyses that scholars in mainstream IR and foreign policy analysis (FPA) produced), especially until the mid-1990s. In comparing the "two cultures of academia and policy-making," Alexander L. George provides valuable insight for both the theoretician and the practitioner, albeit in the US context. George's distinction between the two cultures is straightforward:

> The development of theory about international relations by academic scholars and the use of this knowledge by practitioners in the conduct of foreign policy has been handicapped by the different cultures in which they have traditionally resided. Members of these two communities have been socialized in quite different professional and intellectual worlds. They generally define their interest in the subject of international relations differently and have pursued different objectives; and, not surprisingly, for all these reasons they have difficulty communicating with each other.[1]

George, like others, observes how members of the two cultures view one another. Practitioners have a certain discomfort with, and not much trust in, theory. They complain about academics' lack of understanding about the worldly dynamics affecting the process of making decisions. Academics are believed to "overintellectualize"[2] policy making with academic jargon. In fact, the very effort to make science out of foreign policy is questioned; after all, policy making and diplomacy are seen by practitioners as an art, not a science. Most critically, sound academic products, even when appreciated, are underutilized in the daily reality of decision making under time pressure and other exigencies.

---

[1]   Alexander L. George, *Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1993): 145.

[2]   Alexander L. George, *"The Two Cultures of Academia and Policy-Making: Bridging the Gap," Political Psychology* (Special Issue: Political Psychology and the Work of Alexander L. George) 15 (1994): 148.

For academics, on the other hand, practitioners "are too aconceptual and atheoretical, even anticonceptual and antitheoretical."[3] Too much reliance on their intuitive judgment and experience leads practitioners to cognitive biases, depriving them of the self-critical faculties needed for testing the validity of their approaches to issues – in this case, foreign policy. Yet, practitioners seldom, if ever, realize that for all their aversion to theory, they are in fact using it in their everyday decisions. (Arguably, tenets of the realist theory, with its emphasis on national interest and balance of power, are the most influential among many practitioners.) Moreover, they are deprived of the methodological advantages of an academic discipline for testing the generalizations and assumptions involved when dealing with problems. Nor do they have enough empirical information, including historical cases across different settings, to systematically develop a knowledge base and methodology. Add to this the all-too-well-known curse of groupthink, and one sees a practice much in need of improvement.

A theme very similar to George's two cultures is used in Christopher Hill and Pamela Beshoff's co-edited *Two Worlds of International Relations: Academics, Practitioners and the Trade in Ideas*, which focuses on Britain as well as other contexts.[4] Academics and policy makers alike contribute to this volume, and offer analyses, observations, and anecdotes that largely overlap with George's account of the US context. However, whereas George advocates for, and offers ways of, bridging the gap between two cultures, the volume on "two worlds," while recognizing the advantages that may come from cross-fertilization, leans towards a cautionary analysis, pointing to the risk of over-intermingling and its negative consequences for academia. In his introduction, Hill prefaces the cautionary view:

> It is difficult indeed to free oneself from the pressures and conventional wisdoms of one's own time. That is precisely what is supposed to characterise a good academic; the ability to pursue an independent line of thought. And if academics are not well enough chained to the mast to resist the siren song of policy relevance, who else is there?[5] …The irreducible starting point is that academic IR is half in love with policy and its milieu.…[6]

The attraction of foreign affairs is by no means limited to British academia. In a country like Turkey, which has been experiencing domestic socio-political transformation since the early/mid-1980s, and which has found itself, externally, in the middle of a regional geopolitical commotion with broad international implications, not to mention the more recent developments in the Middle East, foreign affairs does stand out as an ever-current and attractive subject of commentary for laymen and experts alike. In 2005, Turkish academics attending the Workshop on International Relations Studies and Education in Turkey,[7] organized by Ankara University's faculty of political science, complained about the wide range of professional associations in Turkey – from doctors to miners – commenting on foreign policy. More disturbing for the scholars was the inflation of self-acclaimed experts lured into televised debates, offering analyses on different subjects each time. Foreign policy was just too sexy, one academic commented.

---

[3]   George, "The Two Cultures," 151.

[4]   Christopher Hill and Pamela Beshoff, eds., *Two Worlds of International Relations: Academics, Practitioners, and the Trade in Ideas* (London: Routledge, 1994).

[5]   Christopher Hill, "Academic International Relations: The Siren Song of Policy Relevance," in Hill and Beshoff, *Two Worlds*, 8.

[6]   Hill, "Academic International Relations," 11.

[7]   *Uluslararası İlişkiler* [*International Relations, Special Issue on International Relations and Education in Turkey*] 2 (2005).

The impact of meta-theoretical debates in IR (inspired by the broader debate within social sciences) on the theory and practice debate became evident especially in the second half of the 1990s. One of the most significant intellectual exchanges directly relevant to this perspective took place between William Wallace on one side, and Steve Smith and Ken Booth on the other.[8] The responses given to Wallace by Smith and Booth show that the debate transcended the issue of the relationship between academics and policy makers to discuss different ontological and epistemological assumptions held by positivist scholars on the one hand and post-modernist challengers on the other. Wallace argued that (British) academia was too distanced from policy circles, having lost touch with the real world of politics and policy, and that academia should not shy away from 'speaking truth to power.' Wallace maintained that too much theorizing comes at the cost of empirical studies; doing theory for theory's sake amounts to a self-righteous attitude. Recognizing the dangers of too close a relationship between scholars and government, however, Wallace argued for 'semi-detachment,' wherein one can give advice without being pulled in fully.

Booth and Smith delivered a strong post-positivist response, not least because Wallace, while arguing for closer engagement with policy, was highly critical of the ivory tower effects of entering meta-theoretical debates as a result of being too fond of theory. Smith, in good post-positivist fashion, challenged Wallace's foundationalist assumptions and argued that "there is no view from nowhere,"[9] that is, that there is no foundational basis from which pure truth can be deduced. According to Smith, policy and theory are inexorably intertwined and scholars cannot pretend to have access to 'truth,' which they can then confidently convey to policy. Yet, he made clear that giving policy advice was not the problem: "the problem is if those who give it are unaware of the extent to which they are standing on the policy conveyor-belt of the state … it means taking the 'givens' of policy-makers as the starting point of analysis."[10] Smith believed that Wallace was wrong to assume value-neutrality on the part of academics. According to Booth, Wallace was attacking a "straw man from an ethnocentric liberal top-down perspective."[11]

The theory-practice debate between the three men was essentially an intra-academy debate rather than a debate between members of the worlds of theory and policy. (Admittedly, Wallace has links to politics, namely through his association with the Britain's Liberal Party.) And it is not unwarranted that with the exchange between Wallace and Smith/Booth the debate shifted its focus to a much larger issue than the typical theory-practice dichotomy (or non-dichotomy according to the latter scholars). Bernstein et al. argue that, due to a desire to build a science of IR, scholars in this discipline have put some distance between themselves and policy making circles, but that in the 50 years since this practice began, no theoretical IR work has emerged that produces sufficiently useful and confident results.[12] However, this distance does not mean that scholars ceased to cater to the needs of policy makers, especially in the US context, where the disciplines of political science and IR have most flourished.

---

[8]   William Wallace, "Truth and Power, Monks and Technocrats: Theory and Practice in International Relations," *Review of International Studies* 22 (1996): 301-321. Ken Booth, "Discussion: A Reply to Wallace," *Review of International Studies* 23 (1997): 371-377. Steve Smith, "Power and Truth: A Reply to William Wallace," *Review of International Studies* 23 (1997): 507-516. Steve Smith, "International Relations and international relations: The Links between Theory and Practice in World Politics," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 6 (2003): 233-239.

[9]   Smith, "International Relations," 235.

[10]   Smith, "Power and Truth: A Reply to William Wallace," 515.

[11]   Booth, "Discussion: A Reply to Wallace," 377.

[12]   Steven Bernstein et al., "Social Science as Case-Based Diagnostics," in *Theory and Evidence in Comparative Politics and International Relations*, eds. Richard Ned Lebow and Mark Irving Lichbach (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 229.

In fact, Timothy Mitchell alludes to a problematic relationship between the two groups as a result of the "imperial ambition of postwar American politics," where "[p]olitical science had to expand its boundaries to match the growth of postwar U.S. power, whose ambition it would offer to serve."[13]

Parallel to the putative distancing from the 'real world,' one is also reminded by Helen Milner's argument that the voluntary separation IR attained in its search for disciplinary autonomy from 'political science' in the 1950s and 1960s was a mistake.[14] She asks that 'comparative politics' be brought back into IR. The need to reconcile these two disciplines is also echoed by comparativists such as Karen Remmer,[15] who points to the global political developments of the last decades of the twentieth century, including democratic transitions in various parts of the world, and finds prevalent theoretical explanations to be unsatisfactory because of the divide between IR and comparative politics. In short, the turn taken by IR, both for the sake of academic disciplinary autonomy and scientific credibility, has caused as many questions marks as it has offered new possibilities. Inevitably, views about the theory-practice equation have also been affected.

3. A Perspective: From Theory down to Practice and Back up

The above section is a partial snapshot of the theory-practice debate, reflecting selective observations on what some scholars have discussed. How I view the field, especially regarding the broader debate, is in order at this point.

I believe, as a growing number of observers do, that positivist approaches in IR do not offer fully reliable accounts of how and why things happen in international politics and foreign policy. Similarly, positivist approaches that aim to explain socio-political phenomena in comparative politics, where meta-theoretical discussions do not define the discipline as much as they do in IR, also fall short of helping us fully understand organized human existence.[16] Strands of constructivism in IR (as well as culturalist and structuralist approaches in comparative politics), and the more ambitious theoretical positions such as post-structuralism, offer helpful insights. Recognizing the overbearing importance of context, one ought to be cautious about drawing generalizations across societies.

Generations of scholars and thoughtful social scientists like Max Weber have in different ways argued that the dynamics of social existence, including in the international setting, are qualitatively different from the conditions that prevail in the physical world.[17] Even a classical realist like E.H. Carr argued in 1939 that whereas the analyst in the natural sciences could study facts objectively, for political/international sciences there were no facts independent of the analyst.[18] Following Karl Popper's metaphor of clouds and clocks, Almond and Genco point to the inappropriateness of clock-like assumptions in dealing with political (social)

---

[13]   Timothy Mitchell, "Society, Economy, and the State Effect," in *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn*, ed. G. Steinmetz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 76.

[14]   Helen V. Milner, "Rationalizing Politics: The Emerging Synthesis of International, American and Comparative Politics," *International Organization* 52 (1998): 759-786.

[15]   K. Remmer, "New *Theoretical Perspectives on Democratization,"* Comparative Politics* 28 (1995):103-122.

[16]   A noteworthy initiative is the so-called *Perestroika* movement, which challenged the dominant position of positivistic, quantitative methodology in (American) political science, arguing instead for methodological pluralism: Kristen Renwick Monroe, ed., *Perestroika!: The Raucous Rebellion in Political Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

[17]   Richard Ned Lebow, "What Can We Know? How Do We Know?" in *Theory and Evidence in Comparative Politics and International Relations,* eds. R. N. Lebow and M. I. Lichbach (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 6.

[18]   Possibly, this statement is one of the factors challenging Carr's classification as a realist. E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis: 1919-1939* (Wiltshire: Palgrave, [1939] 2001).

phenomena that are more like unpredictable clouds.[19] Although soft regularities do exist, they argue, attempts at creating a hard science of politics is nothing but "historical deviation, [and] flirtation with mistaken metaphors."[20]

Using a more direct reference to international relations, Bernstein et al. reiterate that humans have a knowledge of structure and process that leads to conscious attempts to influence social phenomena.[21] This outlook is reminiscent of Weber's understanding of the social cosmos: that humans, including politicians, statesmen and stateswomen, diplomats, NGO members, guerrilla leaders, etc., are all purposive and self-conscious actors. Human consciousness, individual and collective, empowers us to change our fates in ways that complicate efforts towards a 'scientific' explanation and prediction of human action. The spacio-temporal contingency of human behaviour is regnant to such a degree that it renders most parsimonious attempts at discovering social scientific laws unsatisfactory at best and often misleading.

With the hindsight provided by the interpretivist turn in social sciences, the more an observer recognizes the socially constitutive, hence the contextually bounded, properties within his or her ontological assumptions, the more likely he or she will find it hard to rely on universal claims. The pertinence of contingency, however, does not mean vindication of pure relativism or that accumulation of knowledge is impossible or undesirable. Post-positivism should not be seen as anti-science.[22] The complexity of, and the intentionality that exists within, the collective human experience render social 'reality' a combined outcome of chance and choice. For any given actor in a specific situation there will often be several choices available to be considered with limited knowledge of the circumstances and approximated understandings of how competing actors think. Therefore, trying to understand the context and the social interplays within any situation is the more apt endeavour for investigating the social cosmos than is seeking measurable, repeated patterns across social domains. As Nicholas Onuf puts it, the world is of our making,[23] and we should aim to understand it accordingly.

International relations and foreign policy are directly implicated by the above view of what kind of a 'reality' is out there to find and how much one can rely on our ways of studying it. After all, the most commonly observed unit of analysis, that is, the foreign-policy-generating state (the nation-state), is a weak starting point for building grand theory. There are too few units and too short a time span of their existence to form a universe that may generate recognizable patterns that can be 'scientifically' measured and predicted. The units are highly dissimilar in capacity, size, and longevity, not to mention divergence of factors affecting their functioning, such as institutions and culture. Such diversity – unsurprising in a social universe – produces a resistance to patterns across time and space. The consequent spacio-temporal contingency lends support to Colin Wight's argument that "[t]he attempt to construct a parsimonious theory of IR is not only flawed and doomed to failure, but also politically and ethically dangerous."[24] Admittedly, FPA (as a sub-discipline of IR), with its

---

[19]   Gabriel Almond and Stephen J. Genco, "Clouds, Clocks, and the Study of Politics," *World Politics* 29 (1977): 505.

[20]   Almond and Genco, "Clouds, Clocks," 522.

[21]   Bernstein et al., "Social Science," 233-234.

[22]   Lebow, "What Can We Know?" 7.

[23]   Nicholas Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).

[24]   Colin Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 8.

actor-specific focus, is much more aware of contingency. Yet, it too constitutes an effort of approximation; not all factors affecting policy can be taken into account when offering explanations of policy choices. That is why "[p]arsimony for its own sake is not revered in FPA." Indeed, foreign policy is rarely, if at all, only about foreign policy. Yet, academic analyses, including FPA, need to impart a sense of certainty to have credibility. One then becomes concerned across the board "about a search for a false certainty and about the relatively trivial nature, and lack of policy relevance, of many 'big' generalizations."[25]

4. A Research Project: A Joint Venture

How can this false certainty be avoided, or at least minimized? How can our academic conceptualizations be brought more in touch with the real world? And how can practitioners assist this process and also benefit from the improved analytical capacity it promises? What should the approach of both sides be? One possible answer is: Greater epistemic humility on the part of academics, and a parallel recognition on the part of practitioners, of the need to conceptualize and contextualize more systematically what is it they are engaged in as makers/implementers of policy. Whether one focuses on the analogy of two different cultures, or two worlds, or the post-positivist critique that calls for a thicker description of the theory-practice dynamic, we need more-satisfactory accounts of this inter-relationship so as to improve the functions of both. For the occasional academic who takes on an advisory role or who is involved in research programs that put him/her in close and extended contact with policy circles, the everyday hands-on experience in the world of practice may have a theory-shattering effect. In other words, my hunch is that academics who venture into the world of policy, especially if they are allowed into central decision-making circles, may start losing faith in some of their favoured grand theoretical explanations of how things work in international relations and foreign policy making.[26]

Paradoxically, practitioners – the group known to dislike theory – are potentially the most inclined to concur, on some fundamental points, with scholars belonging to the non-mainstream theoretical approaches – the group criticized for over-theorizing. A practitioner would be aware of the many variables that go into making a decision and of the power-related implications. He or she would be witnesses to the 'governmentality' dynamics criticized by post-structuralists, even if he or she might not conceptualize the situation as such or critique it, let alone work to change it. The systemic forces of the international system make little sense when accounting for decisions of foreign policy that in reality, practitioners observe, reflect a compromise between a multitude of mundane factors, ranging from the simple need to respond to press reports, to personal rivalries, character differences between leaders, path-dependency, political culture, bureaucratic culture, and pure coincidence. Game theory is likely to appear to them as an approximation of extreme proportions.

In view of these factors, I offer an idea for a specific research project: a joint endeavor between the theory people and the policy people. To bring added value to the field, this project would employ a *reflexive* approach by including practitioner participants who are familiar with theory.

---

[25]   Bernstein et al., "Social Science," 256

[26]   The (too) few academics to whom I have, in passing, directed the question as to how their experience with the world of practice affected their view of theory admit that they have come to question the validity of the assumptions at the core of the grand IR theories they normally work with.

From the point of view of conventional/positivist perspectives on social enquiry, close proximity to the object of research is a problem. However, as some feminists, constructivists, and other scholars now argue, participation and personal experience need not be seen as a source of debilitating 'contamination.' Focusing on feminist studies, Ann Tickner argues that acknowledging the inevitable subjectivity in analysis may, in fact, work to increase objectivity.[27] In this sense, personal experience is viewed as an asset: "feminists believe one's own personal position in the research process to be a corrective to 'pseudo-objectivity.'"[28] Although feminism's bold move to embrace subjectivity is derived from its aims of the empowerment of women, the reflexive method it advocates has a larger applicability.

The research project I propose would use incumbent practitioners who have preferably received graduate academic training in theory and/or who would be given additional training/ refresher courses in theory. They would contribute to the project through their participation in the foreign policy milieu they have agreed, and been officially blessed, to analyze. The project would not be a typical case of 'practitioner-based enquiry/research,' but one tailored to the environment of foreign policy making. Applied especially in fields such as medicine and education, practitioner-based research is about the practitioner being trained in research methodology and thereafter engaging in research in his or her usual professional setting while continuing his or her daily practice.[29] More-direct 'taking part' would be required in the project I am proposing. Ralph Petmann, in explaining his 'commonsense constructivism,' emphasizes the importance of actually partaking in the process under study:

> …going beyond the limits of rationalism sets means more than ascertaining what those who make or think about foreign policy say they are doing (an injunction rule-oriented constructivists are happy to observe). It also means participating ourselves in the foreign policy practices we want to understand and explain (an injunction only commonsense constructivists routinely observe). It means finding out what is involved experientially *as well as* analytically, not only from the 'horse's mouth,' but from living with horses as one of the herd…
>
> Why? Because so much of what we need to know is in the other people's heads. It has to do with perceptions and intentions of an individual, communal, or collective kind, and getting knowledge of these things takes more than trying harder to listen. It requires participation as well.[30]

Pettman further clarifies that "taking part" is also more than the thick description associated with cultural studies; a form of such close participation can be developed and harnessed in the service of science and craft at the same time.

My project would be comprehensive and last long enough to produce satisfactory results, with the scholars and practitioners cooperating under an institutional arrangement, for example, between a university or several universities and a foreign ministry. Such a project would be based on an agreement rendering both institutions accountable to each other. On the policy side, confidentiality issues would have to be addressed. In addition to the advantage of employing researchers with security clearances, one way of controlling the

---

[27]   J. Ann Tickner, "Feminism Meets International Relations: Some Methodological Issues," in *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations,* eds. B. Ackerly, M. Stern and J. True (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 27.

[28]   Tickner, "Feminism Meets International Relations," 28.

[29]   For a comprehensive study on this methodology applied in education (but with wider applicability), see Louis Murray and Brenda Lawrence, *Practitioner-Based Enquiry: Principles for Post-Graduate Research* (London: Falmer Press, 2000) and Louis Murray, "What is Practitioner Based Enquiry?" *British Journal of In-Service Education* 18 (1992), 191-196.

[30]   Ralph Pettman, "Commonsense Constructivism and Foreign Policy: A Critique of Rule-Oriented Constructivism," in *Foreign Policy in a Constructed World,* ed. Vendulka Kubálková (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), 253.

confidentiality problem could be to present the end results in general terms, despite the case-specificity that would be inevitable, and in fact desirable, at the research/observation stage. A sufficient number of practitioners would have to be found and (re)trained for the project. On the academic side, specific modalities of research ethics would have to be developed and enforced.

Practitioners of diplomacy are constantly expected, more so today than in the past, to analyze. For this they rely on a mixed capacity of intuition and careful deliberation (time allowing), as well as practical knowledge of the field, developed over the years within their specific professional cultures. However, their everyday practices and especially their methodology in forming those analyses are seldom, if ever, scrutinized as carefully as academic analyses are. In this sense, a research project conducted over a period of several years could also serve to detect possible cognitive biases and offer corrective methodology.

The academic benefits of such a research project and hence the enthusiasm of the university(ies) would be obvious. They would have recruited theory-cognizant observers in the center of policy making who would be institutionally instructed to help test some theoretical assumptions about how decisions are made, and what domestic and international factors impact the decision-making environment. As for the foreign ministry, it would need to see how some of the compromises it would have to accept by agreeing to such an undertaking would be outweighed by the potential benefits. One way of compensating for allocating key personnel, albeit part-time, for this project could be an arrangement whereby the ministry would rely on its academic partner institution(s) to provide, when requested, informative reports, case studies, analyses, historical studies, opinion polls, etc. on specific issues, countries, and/or regions. In return, academics would run the research project within the ministry, but ensure the ministry did not choose which theoretical approaches were to be tested. It might be prudent to have a consortium of academic institutions to reflect the different approaches within the discipline.

Given the emphasis on contingency and the caution against generalizations described above, I do not suggest that the results of such a research project involving one country would offer universally applicable truths. Notwithstanding case specificity, one does nevertheless find striking similarities between the workings of foreign ministries despite different political and bureaucratic cultures. Observations by James Cable, a former British ambassador and former Head of Planning Staff in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, would sound familiar to his Turkish and other counterparts: "[the] hectic routine of telegrams and telephoning and trotting to and from the offices of ministers and under-secretaries left little time for analysis, for the consideration of alternative policies, for the elaboration and submission of new initiatives."[31] Others' observations, for example, those of Iver B. Neumann about speech writing in the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, would also ring true for some: "There is anecdotal evidence suggesting that the arguments made here [i.e., that speech writing is first and foremost a question of ministerial identity building and that the rigidity of such texts can only be broken through the interference of politicians] may be generalized to other Foreign Ministries and foreign policy-making institutions in late-modern states."[32] In view of these

---

[31]   James Cable, "Foreign Policy Making: Planning of Reflex?" in *Two Worlds of International Relations: Academics, Practitioners, and the Trade in Ideas*, eds. Christopher Hill and Pamela Beshoff (London: Routledge, 1994), 94.

[32]   Iver B. Neumann, "'A Speech That the Entire Ministry May Stand For,' or: Why Diplomats Never Produce Anything New," *International Political Sociology* 1 (2007): 193. Having agreed to a job offer in the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, Neumann, considering himself a participant observer, used this opportunity as well as his contacts with the foreign policy world to make

comments – and unless similar projects have already been conducted that I am not aware of – the research project advocated in this essay might provide some original findings that could be tested in other settings as well.

One might then ask if such a research project could be conducted in Turkey, for example. On the academic side, one could find enough interest. Turkish IR academia has grown impressively over the last 25 years. In 1984, as I was taking my university entrance exams, there were only three IR university departments in Turkey (four, if one included the quasi-IR department of political science at Boğaziçi University). As the number of IR departments in Turkey has since multiplied exponentially, so too has the number of Turkish graduates with PhD degrees, mostly from European and North American universities, who have returned to teach at universities across Turkey. Theory, including the post-positivist strand, is not seen as an esoteric preoccupation. (And those willing to offer analysis for policy makers, especially through the media, are abundant, in fact, over-abundant.) On the policy side, however, the indicators are mixed. Turkey's foreign ministry has been increasing the number of its political officers over the years, and the possibilities for graduate study offered to young recruits have expanded. The academically minded leadership may also look favourably on research projects. Nevertheless, the increase in the number of officers has not yet caught up with the growing workload of the foreign service at home and abroad. The geopolitical commotion around Turkey continues to stretch personnel resources. The series of crises around Turkey do not facilitate a mind-set that would give priority to pursuing academic studies that would engage, albeit part-time, officials in key departments close to policy making. Crises also affect academics, and especially the think-tank community, who find themselves all-too-readily categorized as pro-/anti-government when offering – arguably too often – their analyses to the ever-demanding media, in particular through televised debates. Perhaps in a calmer foreign policy environment in Turkey the idea of a novel joint research project would be embraced with greater enthusiasm, especially on the part of practitioners.

5. Concluding Remarks

The theory and/versus practice debate in IR has several faces. One issue is about how those who belong to either of these two pseudo-camps view each other, that is, what their relative advantage and disadvantages are. It is also possible to debate how close academics should be to the policy environment and whether they could, in the first place, possess a scientifically derived 'truth' to be conveniently offered to policy makers. One must take seriously the critique brought against the search for theory that it imparts universal claims, as is often the case in positivistic accounts of IR.

Given the pertinence of these questions and the inconclusiveness of the meta-theoretical debates within the discipline, I offer an idea, to be further developed, for a research project aimed at bringing together the comparative advantages of theory and policy. The aim of this project would be to understand to what degree (if any) the main theoretical approaches – grand and micro – about international relations and foreign policy making are corroborated – individually or eclectically – by the daily practice of diplomacy. Using practitioners trained

---

poignant, philosophically minded observations. Although some of his points do not concur with my own experience in the Turkish setting, Neumann's work offers a rare insight into ministry workings. See also Iver B. Neumann, "To be a Diplomat," *International Studies Perspectives* 6 (2005): 72-93.

in theory and working in a foreign ministry – embedded researchers who are theoretically aware – would offer research advantages associated with the reflexive method. Given the power-knowledge *problematique*, such a project would need to be ideology-proofed as much as possible. And a ministry willing to devote personnel as well as unprecedented access in the name of science – and/or to increase its analytical capacity – would have to be found. Moreover, the proposed idea would have to be rigorously evaluated by academics from a variety of theoretical backgrounds to see if it also makes sense to them, and not only to the author of this article and like-minded practitioners. If the project does find support from both sides, the end result would be rewarding to the IR community and policy makers alike.

As for the debate about how much an engagement is desirable and appropriate between academia and the world of policy; there is no universally applicable blueprint. Cultural and institutional traditions – hopefully taken into account by the broadly universal academic ethical considerations – will determine the right mix in each country. Until a better balance is found, the parallel existence of individuals and institutions (e.g., think tanks) who and which may be ready to engage and cooperate with policy makers on the one hand, and academic institutions that prefer to keep a distance from policy circles on the other, does not seem to be a terrible state of affairs. To end diplomatically, and on a cautiously optimistic note: Moderate amounts of cross-fertilization between academics and practitioners (rather than full mergers) designed to achieve mutual understanding and insight will be mutually rewarding, provided that dissenting views from either side are respected.

Bibliography

Almond, Gabriel and Stephen J. Genco, "Clouds, Clocks, and the Study of Politics." *World Politics* 29 (1977): 489-522.

Bernstein, Steven, Richard Ned Lebow, Janice Stein and Steven Weber. "Social Science as Case-Based Diagnostics." In *Theory and Evidence in Comparative Politics and International Relations*, edited by Richard Ned Lebow and Mark Irving Lichbach, 229-260. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Booth, Ken. "Discussion: A Reply to Wallace." *Review of International Studies* 23 (1997): 371-377.

Cable, James. "Foreign Policy Making: Planning of Reflex?" In *Two Worlds of International Relations: Academics, Practitioners, and the Trade in Ideas*, edited by Christopher Hill and Pamela Beshoff. 93-117. London: Routledge, 1994.

Carr, E. H. *The Twenty Years's Crisis: 1919-1939*. Wiltshire: Palgrave, [1939] 2001.

George, Alexander L. *Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy*. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1993.

George, Alexander L. *"The Two Cultures of Academia and Policy-Making: Bridging the Gap."* *Political Psychology* (Special Issue: Political Psychology and the Work of Alexander L. George) 15 (1994): 143-172.

Hill, Christopher and Pamela Beshoff, eds., *Two Worlds of International Relations: Academics, Practitioners, and the Trade in Ideas*. London: Routledge, 1994.

Hill, Christopher. "Academic International Relations: The Siren Song of Policy Relevance." In *Two Worlds of International Relations: Academics, Practitioners, and the Trade in Ideas*, edited by Christopher Hill and Pamela Beshoff, 3-25. London: Routledge, 1994.

Kristen Renwick Monroe, ed., *Perestroika!: The Raucous Rebellion in Political Science*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

Lebow, Richard Ned. "What Can We Know? How Do We Know?" In *Theory and Evidence in Comparative Politics and International Relations*, edited by R. N. Lebow and M. I. Lichbach, 1-22. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Milner, Helen V. "Rationalizing Politics: The Emerging Synthesis of International, American and Comparative Politics." *International Organization* 52 (1998): 759-786.

Mitchell, Timothy. "Society, Economy, and the State Effect." In *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn*, edited by G. Steinmetz, 76-97. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.

Murray, Louis. "What is Practitioner Based Enquiry?" *British Journal of In-Service Education* 18 (1992): 191-196.

Murray, Louis and Brenda Lawrence. *Practitioner-Based Enquiry: Principles for Post-Graduate Research*. London: Falmer Press, 2000.

Neumann, Iver B. "To be a Diplomat." *International Studies Perspectives* 6 (2005): 72-93.

Neumann, Iver B. "'A Speech That the Entire Ministry May Stand For,' or: Why Diplomats Never Produce Anything New." *International Political Sociology* 1 (2007): 183-200.

Onuf, Nicholas. *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*. Columbia: University of South Caroline Press, 1989.

Pettman, Ralph. "Commonsense Constructivism and Foreign Policy: A Critique of Rule-Oriented Constructivism." In *Foreign Policy in a Constructed World,* edited by Vendulka Kubálková, 249-265. New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2001.

Remmer, K. "New *Theoretical Perspectives on Democratization." Comparative Politics* 28 (1995): 103-122.

Smith, Steve. "International Relations and international relations: The Links Between Theory and Practice in World Politics." *Journal of International Relations and Development* 6 (2003): 233-239.

Smith, Steve. "Power and Truth: A Reply to William Wallace." *Review of International Studies* 23 (1997): 507-516.

Tickner, J. Ann. "Feminism Meets International Relations: Some Methodological Issues." In *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations,* edited by B. Ackerly, M. Stern and J. True, 19-41. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Uluslararası İlişkiler [*International Relations, Special Issue on International Relations and Education in Turkey*] 2 (2005).

Wallace, William. "Truth and Power, Monks and Technocrats: Theory and Practice in International Relations." *Review of International Studies*, 22 (1996): 301-321.

Wight, Colin. *Agents, Structures and International Relations.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.