

The Practitioner/Theorist Divide, Again

Written by Iver B. Neumann

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IVER B. NEUMANN, FEB 28 2013

Social sciences are social not only in the sense that their subject matter is social relations, but also in the sense that their knowledge production rests in a wider social web of relations. There is a burgeoning move within the discipline, spurred on by developments in Science Studies and particularly within Agent-Network Theory, to make the relationship between IR knowledge production and wider social relations an object of empirical inquiry. This has the added advantage of calling attention to the need for science to have a certain degree of integrity of inquiry. I say a certain integrity, for there can be no such thing as absolute integrity. Knowledge production is always reflective of general social conditions, so we are talking about degrees here, and we are talking about a balancing act that will never end. Texts like Wallace (1996) and Hill and Bishoff (1994) spawned debates that seem to go on.

It is sobering to consider the long historical perspective. Writing emerged as a tool for registering work, which is to say that it began life as a surveillance strategy. Geography emerged as a handmaiden for ancient Greek military officers who needed knowledge of actual and prospective theatres of war. Ancient Greeks and the stray Ibn Khaldouns aside, the beginnings of the social sciences are to be found in 16th- and 17th-century European efforts to acquire knowledge about social worlds so that they could be turned into objects that might be ruled more efficiently and more effectively. The adviser to the King is a predecessor of the IR scholar. Furthermore, institutionalised IR owes a lot to people like Dave Davies and Lord Cecil, who were equally keen on harnessing the production of knowledge to a political project. Theirs was peace. There are others; war, development, media spin and so on. Many IR scholars, and I count myself amongst them, take time off to work for state institutions or International Organisations.

All this is fine. It is also fine that IR has a sizeable sub-community of defence intellectuals, whose work is geared specifically towards solving problems for state and non-state actors, and that we do a lot of applied work regarding international political economy, development and the like. It is not only fine, but positively laudable, that IR scholars partake in the public debate about running affairs. After all, it is from the community at large that we take the resources necessary to do what we do, and so it is only fair that we give some of the knowledge we accumulate back to a wider public (Strathern 2004).

What would not be fine, however, would be if we should lose sight of the fact that these applied pursuits are spin-offs of our scientific work rather than core tasks in their own right. To do social science is not to serve a certain political programme, but to model the social and highlight inconsistencies and the costs of doing stuff in this fashion rather than that (see Weber [1919] 1946; Foucault 2011). Rob Walker (1992: 6) issued a related challenge to the discipline some twenty years ago, when he charged that '[t]heories of international relations are more interesting as aspects of contemporary world politics that need to be explained than as explanations of contemporary world politics'. To put it in its starkest form, if IR is only a handmaiden of social forces, then it is not a social science. In light of this, if we ask why IR keeps on studying the practices of great powers, and pay less heed to small and medium-sized powers, why it is that IR uses infinitely less energy studying historical cases than studying present-day cases, then the answer usually given, that it is important to be policy-relevant, comes across as shallow. Being policy-relevant and being the handmaiden of specific forces, be that states, NGOs or some imagined collective, amounts to the same thing, namely to produce instrumental knowledge. With the government playing an ever greater role in the allocation of research money, and with scholars within universities being under ever more pressure to apply for external funding, we must expect there to be ever more instrumentally produced knowledge. The risk is that we end up drowning in

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papers, reports and articles that are of no interest to anybody a year after they were published.

IR comes up a bit short as a social science concerns the strong influence of political concerns that we allow over our choice of subject matter. We tend to concentrate on phenomena that are politically important and agents that are politically powerful, to the detriment of studying stuff that would have added to our general knowledge of the subject matter that we call our own. Particularly for a reflexive science, there is always a balance to be struck between the applied and the basic, and taken as a whole, I think we tend a bit too much towards the applied.

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