

Theory vs Practice: Myth or Reality?

Written by Thomas G. Weiss and Giovanna Kuele

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THOMAS G. WEISS AND GIOVANNA KUELE, MAY 23 2013

“Theory vs. Practice” is a juxtaposition that supposedly says it all. The shorthand conjures up the chasm that separates two belligerents in world politics—those who analyze a subject and those who practice it.[i]

For most scholars, the development of theory, regardless of its relevance outside the hallowed halls of the academy, is highly valued. Simplification and generalization are of the essence. When social scientists ask “so what?” they often do so as part of theory-building. Some might even go so far as to deny that theories and methodologies have to be applied. The use or misuse of scientific knowledge to pursue political agendas is a reason to remain a detached observer on the sidelines and away from the policy fray.

For most policy makers and activists, “theory” is an invective hurled at abstraction and irrelevance. Every situation seems *sui generis*, and thus generalizations can cause more problems than they solve. Even when theories offer explanations, the “unreal” assumptions and simplicity behind them are exposed when events are unpredictable and do not follow the neat patterns necessary to qualify as “parsimonious.” Often practitioners worry about the sources underlying theoretical proposition because if sources are unreliable flawed conclusions follow. The seemingly endless and circular character of academic debates makes it difficult to take seriously tempests in teapots.

All stereotypes have some factual grounding. However, the theorist-vs-practitioner battles have always struck me as especially incongruous for two sets of institutions whose antics I follow, the US Government as a citizen and the United Nations as a professional.

In Washington, visible scholars of international studies—from Harvard’s Henry Kissinger to Stanford’s Condoleezza Rice under Republicans, from Columbia’s Zbigniew Brzezinski to Princeton’s Anne-Marie Slaughter under Democrats—routinely trade academic robes for policy-making positions. The Council of Economic Advisers is almost always chocker-block with tenured faculty—the current chair Alan Kreuger is on leave from Princeton, and the previous two chairs, Austan Goolsbee and Cristina Romer, returned to Chicago and Berkeley. Yet at the beginning of the Obama administration, Harvard’s Joseph Nye lamented the growing differences between the two worlds with academic theorizing saying “more and more about less and less.”[ii] Earlier Bruce Jentleson argued that scholars, in spite of Washington’s revolving door, have little influence.[iii] The reasons for the gap between those who theorize about a subject and those who practice it have been detailed by Alexander George and others.[iv]

If these assertions are true in Washington, what about farther North on the Amtrak line in New York for the United Nations and worldwide for the UN system? Merely mentioning the world organization makes scholarly eyes glaze over. Nonetheless, academics have influenced significantly ideas associated with it, especially for human rights and development. Indeed, research from the independent United Nations Intellectual Project demonstrates that they may be the most important legacy.[v]

The project’s findings trace the links connecting scholars—working as staff members, consultants, or experts—with

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practitioners as key components of the “third UN,” the non-state actors closely engaged but distinct from member states (the first UN) and the Secretariat (the second UN).[vi] Contributions by academics range from research to policy analysis and idea mongering. Together with other actors of the third UN such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and transnational corporations, scholars help advance new information and ideas, push for alternative policies, and mobilize public opinion around UN deliberations and operations.

Moreover, many key contributors to ideas from the first and the second UN had significant prior associations with universities, think tanks, or NGOs—or joined one after leaving government or UN service. Moreover, intellectual energies among the three UNs blend. A revolving door permits academics and national officials to occupy staff positions in UN secretariats, or UN staff members to join NGOs, universities, or national administrations and subsequently engage from outside but informed by experience inside.

“Policy” work or “policy-relevant” research does not advance academic careers, but the importance of scholarly engagement with the UN and vice versa has been recognized at the highest level. So far ten persons with substantial experience within the United Nations and its policy processes have won the Nobel Prize in economic sciences—Jan Tinbergen, Wassily Leontief, Gunnar Myrdal, James Meade, W. Arthur Lewis, Theodore W. Schultz, Lawrence R. Klein, Richard Stone, Amartya Sen, and Joseph Stiglitz (a former World Bank chief economist now closely associated with the UN).

Contemporary international relations scholarship privileges mathematical models, complex methodologies, and theories expressed in jargon that often is unintelligible to colleagues let alone policy-makers. At the same time, the bulk of scholarship about the United Nations and the main substantive issues on the world organization’s agenda has long emanated from universities, specialist research institutes, and learned societies in North America and Western Europe and recently from the global South.

During World War II, the notion that the UN would be an essential instrument of Washington’s foreign policy attracted support from the Carnegie Endowment that promoted research about the new organization by scholars and officials from the League of Nations. Fast-forwarding, external policy research organizations with UN links today include the Stanley Foundation, the International Peace Institute, the Center for International Cooperation, and the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue. Two professional associations, the Society for International Development (founded in 1967) and the Academic Council on the United Nations System (founded in 1987), are parts of academic research networks focused on the world organization. Internal think tanks such as the UN Research Institute for Social Development and UN University are semi-autonomous with recycled academics as staff who can provide backdoor channels for external scholarly expertise.

Thus, the world organization benefits from formal and informal institutional channels for academic inputs. Human rights and sustainable development provide illustrations with lessons for wider application.

Francis Deng, a distinguished anthropologist-and-lawyer-cum-diplomat, was (1992-2004) the representative of the UN secretary-general for internally displaced persons, but his work was based at the Brookings Institution—and a similar independent arrangement continued with his successors, Professor Walter Kälin from the University of Bern and Choloka Beyani from the London School of Economics. Deng and Roberta Cohen deftly reframed “sovereignty as responsibility,”[vii] a notable contribution to reframing state sovereignty not as a privilege but as responsibility. This norm was in turn made more visible and palatable in 2001 by the report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect*.^[viii] Deng’s success reflected his ability to straddle the two camps—taking advantage of being a practitioner within the United Nations *and* outside it. Of particular pertinence was his base at a public-policy think-tank working in tandem with universities and keeping a respectable distance from governments and predictable pressure, processes, and procedures.

Secretariats may turn to thinkers to formulate ideas that are controversial but propitious for a new agenda. One of the clearest examples was “human development,” which the UN Development Programme imported from Mabbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen (two former roommates during PhD studies at Cambridge University).[ix] The concept has seen continual refinements since the 1990 publication of the first *Human Development Report*. The work of a few

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staff members was augmented by an international team of scholars (including early on Paul Streeten from Boston University and Richard Jolly from the University of Sussex). The model continues today. The annual *Human Development Report*, along with accompanying national and regional reports, has intellectual bite. Predictable political flak comes from irritated governments, which resent bad publicity because poorer neighbors get higher ratings resulting from more sensible decisions about priorities, for example devoting limited resources to education and health instead of weapons. Indeed, many governments have protested using regular budgets to commission finger-pointing research by independent analysts.

Another example is the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that shared (with Al Gore) the 2007 Nobel Prize for contributing to the advance of scientific and policy-relevant knowledge. This global volunteer network of world-class scientists is the leading authority on climate change. A controversial hypothesis with too little data about the human responsibility for global warming had by 2007 garnered overwhelming scientific credibility. The Nobel Committee praised “their efforts to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change.” Following the 1987 establishment by the World Meteorological Organization and the UN Environment Programme, skeptics vilified the IPCC; but the Peace Prize acknowledged its scientific value-added.

The positive intellectual return from outside-insiders or inside-outsiders flies in the face of the binary theorist-vs-practitioner categories. Academic input could and should well be replicated for other controversial issues for which independent research is required, institutional protective barriers are high, normative gaps exist, and political hostility is widespread. Improving the UN’s research, analysis, and policy work would permit the secretary-general and the system as a whole to play more influential roles in world political, economic, social, and environmental decision-making. The world organization should do a number of things: create islands for truly independent research and analysis; more systematically borrow staff from universities and think tanks worldwide; and import academics for fixed (not permanent) contracts.

So, some scholars influence the real world, and some practitioners use theories. Theoretical training is useful to improve practice, and experience in the policy arena can change research agendas and improve classroom performance. I have illustrated this argument anecdotally for the US Government and with decades of research for the United Nations—neither reputed to be an intellectual hotbed.

The devaluation of policy-relevant scholarship in the academy (e.g., in courses, journals, job markets, tenure decisions), the increased role of well-heeled think tanks, and the supposed limited interest of practitioners in theory per se provide only partial explanations. Stereotypes enjoy a long half-life even when inappropriate.

We should dispel the myths that scholars and practitioners come from Mars and Venus. They do not. There have more fruitful interactions and synergies than we think.

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[i] Thomas G. Weiss and Anoulak Kittikhoun, guest editors, *Theory vs. Practice: A Symposium*, special issue of *International Studies Review* 13, 1 (2011).

[ii] Joseph S. Nye Jr, “Scholars on the Sidelines,” *The Washington Post*, 13 April 13 2009.

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[iii] Bruce W. Jentleson, "The Need for Praxis: Bringing Policy Relevance Back In," *International Security* 26, no. 4 (2002):169-183.

[iv] Alexander L. George, "The Two Cultures of Academia and Policy-Making: Bridging the Gap," *Political Psychology* 15, no. 1 (1994): 143-172. See also Michel Girard, Wolf-Dieter Eberwein, and Keith Webb, eds., *Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy Making: National Perspectives on Academics and Professionals in International Relations* (London: Pinter, 1994); Christopher Hill and Pamala Beshoff, eds., *Two Worlds of International Relations: Academics, Practitioners and the Trade in Ideas* (London: Routledge, 1994); Lisa A. Anderson, *Pursuing Truth, Exercising Power: Social Science and Public Policy in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "International Relations: the Relevance of Theory to Practice," in *Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2008), 648-660, and "The Question of Relevance," in *The Future of Political Science*, ed. Gary King, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Norman H. Nie (New York: Routledge, 2009), 252-254.

[v] The project's two overarching volumes are Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis, Louis Emmerij, and Richard Jolly, *UN Voices: The Struggle for Development and Social Justice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); and Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, and Thomas G. Weiss, *UN Ideas That Changed the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). Further information about other books and the oral history can be found at www.unhistory.org.

[vi] Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis, and Richard Jolly, "The 'Third' United Nations," *Global Governance* 15, no. 1 (2009): 123-142.

[vii] Thomas G. Weiss and David A. Korn, *Internal Displacement: Conceptualization and its Consequences* (London: Routledge, 2006).

[viii] International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2001).

[ix] Craig N. Murphy, *The UN Development Programme: A Better Way?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

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