

# 'Mind the Gap': Triangulating the Worlds of State, Academia, and Think-Tanks

Written by Piki Ish-Shalom

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PIKI ISH-SHALOM, SEP 5 2015

If you got this far through the article (and early indeed it is) you're probably aware of and interested in the "gap" debate in the discipline: does the academic discipline of IR have some bearing and influence on policy-making, and if so, to what extent and in what ways? On one end of the spectrum, there are those who lament about the irrelevancy of academia in the real world and/or those who wish having nothing to do with the twisted world of *realpolitik*. They feel perfectly comfortable in the lofty air of the Ivory Tower. At the other end of the spectrum, are those who empirically point to many examples of scholars who gained the ear of the power-that-be, or those who call for a normative engagement with the real world in the hope of bettering it. The truth is, as many other aspects of the field of International Relations, situated in a middle-ground perspective. There is an inescapable (mutual) influence between university and state, but often the influence is convoluted, dependent on the interests and dictated by the state, and hence not necessarily as planned by and wished for by scholars (Ish-Shalom 2013). Thus, the relationship between state and university is far from harmonious and is hindered by several factors. Here I will indicate a couple of those factors and briefly propose a normative scheme that could help academia in the important task of bettering the world, without thereby losing its constitutive rationale and institutional autonomy. The proposal involves recognizing the important role of think-tanks as a mediating medium between university and state.

### Disharmony

There are many factors complicating the relationship between university and state but I will focus here on two that derive from fundamental differences between the two institutions: 1) the vocational and 2) the institutional timelines. Firstly, the primary mandate of states is the provision of primary and public goods, such as welfare and security. At the heart of the nature of states, is a commitment to provide these goods to their members, namely their citizens. In that respect, states are particularists. Universities, as indicated by their name, are committed to a more universal constituency and provide this universal constituency with knowledge, which they produce and distribute universally and impartially (Ish-Shalom 2014). Other differences then derive from this fundamental difference.

For instance, the vocational differences project on the attitudes towards the conduct of research. States are interested in the production and distribution of knowledge, but their main interest is and should be in applied research as directed to the welfare and security of their citizens. The research interest of universities however, lies foremost in basic research, in knowledge for knowledge sake. In the field of International Relations and especially in conflict studies, universities and the state may actually be on a collision course, and for several reasons. IR scholarship seeks to understand the phenomena of war and conflict, their sources, nature, unfolding, and ending. States will look for ways to employ this research to, among other things, overcome their adversaries in war and conflict. This collision course is set even though the difference between basic research and applied research is not dichotomous. For studies concerning war and conflict in particular, university-based scholars are interested in applying the basic research they conduct. They do consider how best to apply the knowledge they gain from that kind of research. But while university-based scholars try to use the knowledge to overcome war and conflict, states' organs try to use the same knowledge to overcome *in* war and conflict. This is a crucial vocational difference that should not be undermined: the thrust of university-based scholars of war and conflict is a universal and impartial application of knowledge while state-employed experts' is particular and partial application. Thus, even if both universities and

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state are interested in applying knowledge for problem solving, the problem they both seek to solve is different. For university and its scholars, the problem is war and they aim to use knowledge to end it, for the state and its organs, it is defeat and they aim to use knowledge to win.

A second and acute structural difference, especially in issues of war and conflict is a temporal aspect. The interest of the state in war and conflict heightens in the midst of these phenomena; in other words, their interest is being shaped in and by crisis. It is in the course of conflict and war that the state requires consultation and expertise, which subsequently necessitates an urgent response. By contrast, the university's treatment of war and conflict is not constrained by urgency. It is shaped by the same structural features that shape basic research, which is time-consuming. Different timelines apply here, for it is when the state needs academic expertise the most that academic knowledge may be absent.

Think of how much time is required to do anything our universities care about. There are many reasons for the lengthy timeline. It takes time to plan and conduct research, including raising the required funds and grants. But conducting the research is not enough. We are also expected to publish it. Without publication no research is really concluded, nor valued. The publication process consumes several more months of reviewing, rejections, reviewing, revising, resubmitting, and acceptance. The acceptance verdict commences another phase in the research cycle, in which the concluded research joins the infamous backlog and lies in the CV under the heading of 'forthcoming'. Even with the welcomed innovations of prepublication (Online First, Advanced Articles, FirstView, etc.), it is a matter of a year or two before final and conclusive publication. Then starts the nail beating; waiting for some down-the-road publications that will quote your own published research. When quotations start to appear, the circle can be seen as complete, and the researcher can start pushing for promotion, yet another process that lasts an eternity. University has all the time in the world.

Academic life lingers and thrives on a lengthy timeline. The lingering structures our time expectations and these reify the structure of the publication industry as well as facilitate the creation of a monstrous backlog. We no longer expect to produce relevant pieces of research; relevant in the sense of providing useful information in a timely manner. When our research is being published it is already out of pace with real-time events. Thus, we are boasting 'the academic perspective'. Arguably, the added-value of academic research is not in its immediacy, but in providing retrospect.

Unfortunately, even if we ourselves got used to this lingering of time, the world has no time for this kind of timeline, especially not during conflicts that tend to unfold as crises. Crisis is a state of instability that requires immediate decisions (Hermann 1972). This immediacy clashes with the protracted pace of university. Executive decisions, especially in crises, need data and information and they need it in a timely and relevant fashion. Executives need the products of research in exactly that fashion, which university-based scholars already forsook. Therefore, this constitutes another structural gap that hampers the relationship between universities and the state and one that can heighten the tensions between the two institutions. The state expects fast research and can blame scholars for failing to deliver the goods they were supposed to deliver, and were expected to deliver when funded by state. Scholars are thus sometimes blamed for being aloof from the everyday and pressing needs of citizens, as well as wasting precious time that could have come handy in times of crisis and conflict.

## **Mind the Gap?**

Therefore, some sort of institutional gap indeed exists between the state and universities, and although some information does flow between the two institutions, it is not necessarily as truthful as we would want it to be. There are normative reasons for academia to bridge the gap by encouraging a better flow of knowledge. Though—considering the aforementioned institutional differences—bridging the gap should be advanced with caution, especially when called for by the state to advise about war and conflict. The risk of university to be co-opted by the state, which would shift the nature of universal research to advancing particular and statist interests, is always looming above the relationship. And yet, inasmuch as the risk of co-option is ever-present, academia should still be keen on establishing channels to influence state conduct. Establishing such channels may help academia providing the contribution to society it longs for, for example by providing alternative policies than war and/or by moderating state violence in war. Think, for example, of the possibility of teaching state agents Just War Theory. Or, and more

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important and appropriate to the role of academia in democratic societies, think of the possibility of university-based scholars to be engaged in the public sphere as theoretician-citizens (Ish Shalom 2013); as those who do not necessarily try to preach and impose answers on the public, but instead those who ask questions and raise doubts, namely those whose most important social and political function is to continuously open up intellectual space for criticism (see also Levine 2012). Whilst university commitment to basic research – knowledge-for-knowledge sake – should not be foregone, one of the responsibilities of academia should be to benefit society at large. Yet, when society is constituted in line with the state and along partial lines, basic research clashes with societal concerns. On the other hand, when society is conceptualized universally, academic basic research may sit comfortably with the vocation of bettering the world.

Thus, when asked to guide state organs in conflict and war-related issues, university-based scholars should be cautious and wary about cooperating with the state, as cooperation can lead to co-option. But at the same time, there is a need to strike a balance between maintaining the autonomy of universities and making sure academic knowledge is not solely confined to academia. Think-tanks may serve a crucial role in striking this important yet delicate balance.

Think tanks may bridge the gap between state's needs for expertise and academia's desire and responsibility to contribute to society. They are mostly interested in applied research and can operate in the timeline required by the state in times of crisis. In the collision course between the state and university, think-tanks can be mediators; not only in the sense of a transmission belt, but also in the sense of a shock absorber. They can become the actors who translate academic universal and basic research into something the state needs and can cope with. In addition, by providing the essential expert information to the state, they can help university-based scholars withstanding the heavy pressure of the state, as was explained above, which too often results in university-based scholars serving statist interests instead of the interest of universality. Furthermore, by heeding the state's need for consultation, think-tanks experts allow university-based scholars to focus on opening the intellectual space for criticism in civil society.

Another aspect that qualifies think tanks as the link between the state and universities, is that they are populated by people from the two worlds: university-educated scholars (and sometimes scholars who double their university affiliation with a think-tank association) *and* former security agents, who went into the research world as a second career. The combination of the two worlds personnel is another institutional feature that equips think-tanks with the desired bridging capacities. The existence of scholars with dual affiliation (university and think-tank) can also help making sure that academic knowledge is not manipulated, misused and abused for sectarian and partial interests, or in other words, that university knowledge continues to be universal.

And, of course, many think-tanks develop their own widely-accessible, fast-tracked publication venues. Think-tanks publish commentaries, blogs, working papers, executive summaries, etc., and distribute it widely through many channels, targeted at many audiences, mainly the executive, the public, and academia. Hence, think-tanks are properly equipped to produce applied and relevant research, distribute immediate knowledge, and facilitate its application, in times of urgency and peace. Often, they also gain the respectability from the public as knowledge producers, and the trust of state and security organs as those who speak their language. Thus, they gain the ears of the security establishment and routinely advise it. It should also be noted that think-tanks operate in different institutional environments from universities. Their whole *raison d'être* is to directly influence the political system and security establishment (Smith 1991; Stone 1996; Rich 2004; McGann 2007; McGann and Weaver 2002), and they have no right of existence without being policy-oriented, without being fully committed to applied research. Therefore, in the case of think-tanks, co-option is less of an issue as they are already part of the establishment and have an invested interest in such cooperation. They are the real go-between that connects universities and the state.

Therefore, a division of labor should be struck between university-based scholars and think-tanks experts. Think-tanks, being policy oriented, are the transmission belt (Lepgold 1998) and are responsible for translating academic basic research and theoretical knowledge into applied research with the results of improving policy guidelines and practice. By providing the state and its security organs with these translation and transmission services, think-tanks can also function as the shock absorbers that reduce the pressure on university-based scholars, allowing a more truthful flow of academic knowledge to the state and permitting academia to be engaged in the public sphere.

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