



DAHRENDORF ANALYSIS

Bringing Academics Closer to Foreign Policy

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Bridging the gap between academia and policy has been the effort of many projects and institutions. This aim is also at the heart of the Dahrendorf Forum and its affiliate organisations. In this brief, I will highlight the academic debate about influencing policy and the often cited issues, such as access and communication between researchers and policy makers. I will argue that one way for academics to start bridging the gap is to learn from others who seek to influence policy and to think in advocacy terms. This entails engaging more deeply with the research community in and outside academia, thinking more politically about one's research, and being more strategic with regard to political allies.

THE 'GAP' AS SEEN FROM ACADEMIA

The relationship between academia and policy has been debated quite consistently in the international relations (IR) and foreign policy literature. Unsurprisingly, there are different approaches to the question. Various authors have lamented the lack of interaction and collaboration between academia and policy, while others see academia's intrinsic value beyond policy. Lorenzo Zambarnardi has argued against the chorus of academics who seek to find greater collaboration and communication between academics and policy makers.¹ Chris Hill has previously also pointed out that by getting too close to policy circles, academics potentially jeopardize their integrity.² On the other hand, Reus-Smit argues that the gap between theory and practice ought to be bridged. He rejects the notion that IR is too 'theoretical' for policy makers. Instead, he argues, IR theory should boldly embrace its political origins, rather than bracketing out normative questions from empirical research, and encourage intellectuals to return to engaging on a wider range of issues in the public sphere.³

The common, if not cliché, view of the gap between policy and academia asserts that policy makers find academic research too theoretical, and academics dismiss policy decisions in their area of expertise as misinformed or short sighted.⁴ While policy makers look for concrete advice, academics often find it superficial to reduce their argument to the 'top three' recommendations, and instead seek to highlight the complexities of the issue.

Critiquing the false dichotomy of this description, Nau argues for an evolutionary understanding of knowledge. While 'speaking truth to power' may be the aim of many political scientists, they should question more frequently what this 'truth' entails. Politics and academic research are intrinsically inter-dependent, and acknowledging this aspect will help in seeking this 'truth'.⁵

Many IR scholars have concentrated on more practical aspects of the theory and policy divide. In contrast to the above, they argue that academics need to be 'pragmatic' to have an impact. Sil and Katzenstein framed this as 'analytical eclecticism', which allows for greater impact and valuable contribution to 'real world' problems.⁶

A key complaint is that the field of IR, particularly in the US context, used to be different: politicians and academics worked closer together and the emerging 'gap' between the two sectors is new and worrying.⁷ Several recommendations have emerged to deal with this. One such recommendation deals with the structure of the academic career, which, at present, does not incentivise policy impact enough. Thus, academics are encouraged to promote publication beyond academic journals and encourage outreach work, through public speeches or media contribution. Additionally, academia could actively promote careers in governmental or non-academic institutions and engage in research with policy makers.⁸ In the US, it is also more common for 'In and Outs' to work in academia with occasional short stints in the public service. In Europe, however,

1 Zambarnardi 2016, p.5

2 Hill, 1994

3 Reus-Smit, 2011, p. 525 and 538 especially

4 Jentleson and Radner, 2011, p. 8

5 Nau, 2008

6 Sil and Katzenstein, 2010, p.425

7 Walt, 2005, p.41; Nye, 2008; Jentleson and Radner, 2011, p.11; Nau 2008

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these opportunities are less common.

Below I will look in greater detail at how and when policy input is possible for academics, what some of the barriers are and how academics can think about their work in terms of an 'advocacy' strategy.

IMPACT AND COMMUNICATION

The obstacles for a more comprehensive collaboration between academics and policy makers have origins in the nature of academic work, in communication, and the capacity on both sides to engage with the other.⁹ Academic careers are primarily built on interaction with - and existence within - the academic field. Incentives and career structures are focused on research, publishing and teaching. In the UK, the concept of 'impact', according to the 'Research Excellence Framework', is defined as 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia'. However, it appears to be a somewhat undefined ambition and the difficulties of demonstrating such 'impact' have been lamented by many academics. This outlook points to the ambition of academic research not to be limited to influencing policy, but also society as a whole. This could mean all kinds of engagements as discussed by the authors above, both the direct impact on decision making and policy,¹⁰ framing debates, or providing alternative concepts.¹¹ For foreign policy or international relations this also means effect on non-government bodies, including civil society and the public discourse on the international sphere.

However, a key obstacle academics and policy makers face is the issue of communication. Academics are trained to communicate with each other rather than anyone beyond their sphere. The overly scientific language increasingly used in academic journals can make it difficult to translate articles into briefs and policy recommendations, although these may be implicitly present in the research.¹² However, some academics have begun to reach out to different forms of publications, mastering the art of Op Eds, blogs, and social media feeds to communicate to a wider audience. These are crucial and very positive developments to create a more open discussion on foreign policy issues. As these developments have been discussed elsewhere, I will explore the different ways in which academics can reach out and diversify the debate on foreign policy.

IS FOREIGN POLICY DIFFERENT?

A key weakness of the IR literature about the academia-policy divide is that it does not address whether foreign policy is different from other policy areas. The communication between

the natural sciences and public health policy, for example, is not necessarily more in sync than in the field of foreign policy. However, some aspects that are specific (though not exclusive) to the foreign policy sphere make this interaction more difficult.

WHERE IS FOREIGN POLICY MADE?

Various ministries, parliamentary influence, missions abroad, historical tendencies and domestic pressure are only a very broad description of the multiple actors involved in developing foreign policy. Due to the multilateral nature of international affairs, international organisations such as the UN and regional organisations are targets for lobbying and advocacy. Thus, influencing foreign policy means working at different levels and engaging with different actors.

An advantage of non-governmental and research institutions who seek to influence policy is that they have a network of staff responsible for promoting a specific policy and potentially targeting specific audiences. A human rights organisation, for example, is likely to be part of a network of offices and organisations working on similar topics, which can be mobilised when specific policy recommendations have been formulated.

COMPETITION

Single academics generally receive little support to bridge this divide and don't have the capacity to promote their research or lobby for the implementation of their recommendations. Both human and financial resources are very limited. This also means that academics are in competition with other sources of information, such as publications from think tanks, NGOs, government research services or private research companies.¹³ These all generally enjoy greater access to policy makers due to institutional ties or human and financial resources. Academic research, which is usually a solo endeavor, takes longer to be produced and written up, and needs to demonstrate its added value in the face of this opposition.

ACCESS

Getting access to policy makers remains an obstacle for academics. Whilst the prestige of an academic institution may help, identifying key contacts, establishing and nurturing these relationships requires time and effort. Networks are narrow and exclusive, which means that often academics who have gained access to policy makers act as gate keepers for other academic influence. Similarly, specific foreign policy experts or diplomats may become the go-to 'policy' person for universities.

The lack of diversity within foreign policy and diplomatic circles also brings additional barriers for interaction between academics

8 Walt, 2005; Nye, 2008

9 Nye, 2008, Walt 2012

10 mostly described by Walt and Nye

11 as discussed by Reus Smit

12 See especially Nye's, 2008, description of his experience in the Carter administration. As well as results from surveys in Avey and Deusch, 2014, p.244

13 Jentlesen and Ratner, 2011, discuss particularly the relevance of think tanks in Foreign Policy research.



and policy makers. To become an academic researcher on foreign policy means not only struggling through social exclusion and the lack of diversity, which continue to characterise the academic sector, but also gaining access to the arguably even more exclusive club of foreign policy. This makes both sectors less likely to engage more or beyond the established but limited channels of interaction.

WHAT DO POLICY MAKERS WANT?

Avenues between academia and policy exist and universities, governments, and institutions are increasingly working to promote collaboration. Some studies with policy makers have highlighted that they see academics mainly as a sources of information, data, or long term advice. Academic research provides an added value of in-depth, independent research. Research by the University of Manchester highlighted the fact that British civil servants consider academic research especially useful when it presents case studies or provides data.¹⁴ Whitehall officials consider the role of academics primarily as a source of information, that is as 'advisers' or 'educators'. But while they are valued as a resource, only 36 percent of respondents said they used academic research a few times a month.¹⁵

A study with national security decision makers in the United States produced different results. Their respondents said they actually prefer arguments rather than empirical data from academics.¹⁶ However, looking at the arguments and debates that these policy makers were responding to, it appears they are generally limited to mainstream and popularised concepts such as Mutual Assured Destruction, Clash of Civilization, Population centric Coin, Structural Realism or Democratic Peace Theory.¹⁷ Thus, the breadth of theories that enter the jargon of policy makers is limited and there is sufficient opportunity for further political engagement.

WHEN DO THEY WANT IT?

Timing is crucial for academic input to be useful, as policy makers seek historical precedents to explain newly arising conflicts or situations. Their questions can be very specific and time sensitive, hence an academic may not be able to provide sufficient research in a short time period. Additionally, the academic may aim for analysis which is too deep, when in fact a policymaker may need a couple of specific recommendations.

Research on the influence of academia in EU migration policy highlighted that there are specific entry points into policy development which are particularly open to input from external research. These are: a.) The development of a 'new' policy or the

application of a policy towards a new area or country, b.) times of crisis that require a sudden input, and c.) the official revision of a policy.¹⁸ However, policy development and implementation is not linear and thus the long standing relationships and availability of academics to provide input and advice are crucial.

There is also a different concern, namely that evidence from academic research is often referred to as 'gold dust'. Any opportunity to make policy appear more evidence based, 'factual' or 'empiric' can strengthen political points. While this means that academic research is valued, it also creates the risk of it being used to justify policy rather than inform it. An interviewee in the study about the role of academics in the development of EU migration policy argued that policy makers simply find an academic who agrees with them.¹⁹ Being politicised is a risk but, as I will discuss, it can also be a strength for academic research.

HOW DO THEY WANT IT?

As described above, the style and requirements for academic research are fundamentally different to those used in the policy circles. Focus on epistemology and even methodology rarely grabs the attention of policy makers. Case studies can be valuable, but mainly when repackaged into 'lessons learned' or 'policy recommendations'. Communicating one's research can be difficult within one's own field, and it is much harder with an audience working in a different methodological or ontological environment.

The reality of operating on the basis of one-pagers is still difficult to accept for academic writers.²⁰ But the critique that short policy briefs lead to a superficial analysis ignores the overflow of information that many decision makers face. Highlighting the shortage of time, Nye points out that academic research often reaches policy makers after a series of 'digestions' by research divisions and colleagues.²¹

Furthermore, government officials are not the only intended audience outside academia. Civil society, the media, and the general public are also key to enabling academic research to impact society. This refers back to what was discussed above by Reus Smit: if academics want to engage publically and bring back the 'public intellectual' instead of being reduced to 'talking heads' and sound bites, our research needs to be communicated to these audiences in a way that is relevant to their work or concerns.²²

The relevance of Marxist debates on the subaltern to power

14 Talbot, C. and Talbot C, 'Sir Humphrey and the professors: What does Whitehall want from academia?' Policy@Manchester, The University of Manchester, April 2014, Figure 5 p. 16

15 Talbot *ibid.* Figure 7 Frequency of the use of academic work, p.18

16 Avey and Desch, 2014, p.244

17 *Ibid.*, p. 233

18 Geddes, A., 2014, 'Relationships between Research and Policy on Migration in the European Union: A Practice-Based Analysis', RSCAS 2014/06 Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Migration Policy Centre

19 Geddes, *ibid.*

20 Described by Nye, 2008 and Walt, 2012

21 Nye 2008

22 as discussed by Reus Smit



relations with developing countries may be obvious to an academic reader. It would, however, require a couple of steps to connect to the reality of the policy maker, the journalist, the NGO worker or a member of the general public. Instead, it would be more useful to rephrase specific recommendations or provide an outline of the risks and opportunities of a policy.

There is also concern about whether policy tends to water down theories. A government development fund for girls' education is unlikely to reflect postcolonial feminist theory, but it could be an essential reference when repackaged into specific recommendations. While a large number of policy makers may see academic research primarily as a source of information, this undervalues the wider contribution academics can make to a public debate. Nevertheless, this does not change the need for improved outreach efforts and communication by academic authors if they seek to affect society as a whole.

HOW CAN ACADEMICS IMPROVE THEIR OUTREACH?

Before starting to promote one's research, it is worth critically engaging with politics: what are the political consequences of what is being proposed and who are potential political allies? It is also helpful to see where the priorities lie for policymakers or civil society, and where there may be possibilities for linkages. Academics should also ask why they seek to influence policy, as this will affect how they choose to engage.

There are the obvious career incentives of ticking the 'impact' box. It may also be a genuine interest in working closely with those developing and implementing policy to have greater access to empirical research. It may be the ambition to improve knowledge dissemination on a topic. But it may also be connected with the ambition to change or stop a policy. As mentioned by some authors above, academic authors should be more embracing of their politics. Committing to an apolitical or simply empirical stand can hinder the full engagement with the issue and also in the outreach work.

THINK ADVOCACY

Academics can learn lessons on advocacy from those who have been doing it for much longer, such as civil society and non-governmental actors. For civil society organisations, advocacy focuses on generating support for specific policies, which is built on identifying key allies. For foreign policy, these can be Parliamentarians, civil servants, representatives in specific missions abroad or other organisations and academics with a similar expertise and outlook. Networks of experts working on a similar issue are an essential counterpart of any organisation's advocacy effort. These experts may focus on either a specific region of policy area. A key benefit of such networks is that they are likely to be long term; whilst experts in the NGO and

think tank sector may move organisations, they are unlikely to change their area of expertise.

Many academics already work closely with policy makers, civil society organisations, and experts in the field. Relationships are often established through field work, interviews and the occasional input in policy revisions. These relationships can, as long as they remain in line with ethical research considerations, be extended and be more collaborative.

BUILD OPEN NETWORKS

To approach politicians and political parties requires critically revising one's research and understanding how it can be placed in the current political debates. While for some research this may be rather obvious, it may be less so for others.

Academics are often linked to NGO networks through organisations as consultants or advisers. They should carefully evaluate which collaboration is merely being used as 'gold dust'. This again depends on what an academic seeks to get out of such collaboration. Working closely alongside academics with a different theoretical or methodological approach can strengthen the ability to inform policy and respond to requests for support from the governments or parliaments. Investing in relationships and time is essential, but also costly.

Advocacy strategies for those interested in affecting policy include investing in relationships with long-serving Members of Parliament in European capitals and in Brussels who can become strong allies. Similarly, the foreign policy advisers of political parties are often longer serving experts with greater interest and influence on policy developments.

Due to the limited access to policy makers, collaboration and open networks are key to progress in advocacy. For academics and civil society organisations to share resources and contacts can be controversial, but encouraging collaboration and promoting each other's research is essential for diversity and for breaking down barriers to access in the field. The goal is not to add to the increasing workload of academics and make them political activists on the side, but instead, make them foster long-term connections to other policy experts and policy makers in the field. The level of participation in networks will vary, and may not continuously include direct input, but staying informed and being part of the discussion on the policy developments is very important.

GET OUT OF THE 'POLITICAL COMFORT ZONE'

A study by the UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) found recently that this is the most common way that academics engage with Parliament in the



UK. Individual relationships with MPs and committees are key for academics to demonstrate that their research has had 'impact', but it is important not to stop there.²³ Going beyond MPs to receive access to first-hand information, identifying the relevant diplomatic posts and civil servants for one's research and to remain updated on the filling of these positions can be essential. At EU level MEPs can often be a good gateway into the Brussels policy making circles as they will be connected to the EU institutions working on relevant policies and regions in foreign policy.

For Brussels, advocacy has become a little easier since the Lisbon Treaty. The decreased influence of the shuffling Member State presidencies resulted in more coordination between the Council Secretariat and Commission, thus allowing for greater continuity. Also, the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) means there is a group of experts focusing on foreign policy. Furthermore, international organisations often have regional experts plugged into the policy debate. The diplomatic communities around IOs in New York or Geneva, for example, are great resources not only for policy content, but also the political context in which they were made.

Academics could benefit from getting deeper into these advocacy networks and relationships and they have much to add. What I propose here is not to unnecessarily politicise academics' research. To the contrary, I argue that academics do have an opportunity to engage in the political debate in a different way than civil society does. While NGOs and civil societies are very advanced in their campaigning and advocacy strategies, they can also be very politicised and this creates mistrust among some policy makers or other involved actors. Proactive academics can use their independent status to add new perspectives to polarised debates.

Thus there is a key opportunity for academics to make a contribution and create a more inclusive discussion. However, it is crucial to step out of one's political 'comfort zone', rather

than limiting interaction to those with similar political views or those who are easier to access. For example, those who consider themselves more 'progressive' may feel more inclined to reach out to liberal or centre-left politicians. The POST study highlighted that Caroline Lucas, the only Green Party MP in the UK, was the MP most referred to by academics.²⁴ While forming relationships with who is closest is the first step, academics can use their more independent position to reach 'across the aisle'. This is not only important with regard to assuring greater impact, it is also an essential opportunity to widen the debate, making it more inclusive and diverse.

BUILD ON EXISTING STRUCTURES

Limited university resources and the wide variety of research taking place make it unrealistic for an institution to get behind each project with potential policy relevance. Its main role is to enable academics to identify avenues for access.²⁵ Thus, it is essential to take advantage of already established channels for outreach. Think tanks have long acted as mediators between academia and policy, opening many doors. The 'In and Outs' are less common in Europe than in Washington DC - thus, fellowships and positions in think tanks may not be as accessible for European academics - but it is essential that academics place themselves in this diverse world of experts and don't ignore the non-academic research by those that are potentially great allies.

CONCLUSION

Influencing policy or engaging in the public discussion on foreign policy has been an ambition of many academics. While many point to the issue of communication, I argue that academics can learn from others that seek to influence policy by applying the logic of advocacy. By taking a more strategic long-term approach, engaging with experts beyond academia, and thinking about research more politically, academics can be closely integrated in the policy making process.

23 Caroline Kenny 'The impact of academia on Parliament: 45 percent of Parliament focused impact case studies were from social sciences', LSE The Impact Blog, 19 October 2015 <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2015/10/19/the-impact-of-uk-academia-on-parliament/>

24 See Kenny, 2015

25 It should be noted that currently NGOs and research institutions who receive British government funds are limited in their ability to use these funds to influence or lobby the British government. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/02/12/research-organisations-could-be-muzzled-by-uk-charity-anti-advocacy-clause/> However large funders such as the EU do not hold the same caveats and funds for specific advocacy efforts exist as well.



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