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# THE THEORY-PRACTICE DEBATE AND CULTURES OF SCHOLARSHIP IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Félix Grenier

<sup>1</sup>University of Ottawa

(CANADA)

E-mails: [Fgren027@uottawa.ca](mailto:Fgren027@uottawa.ca)

## ABSTRACT

Several IR scholars have recently used the theory-practice debate in order to argue for more or less relation between theory and policy-practice in International Relations (IR). Some have also represented IR through theoretical and practical opposing approaches. This article suggests that this dichotomy can also be used to illustrate how IR comprises different but complementary cultures of scholarship. By analyzing the academic practices (i.e. teaching, researching, and diffusing knowledge publicly) of IR scholars at the Center for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St-Andrews, this article clarifies this sociological understanding of academic work in IR. More precisely, it provides explanations about the notions of theoretical and practical cultures of scholarship and illustrates, by referring to a series of interviews conducted at the CSTPV during the summer 2012, how a theoretical culture of scholarship is involved in the IR scholars teaching, research, and knowledge diffusion practices.

**Keywords:** International Relations, Theory-practice debate, cultures of scholarship, sociology of International Relations, Center for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, academic practices.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

During the summer 2012, I had the opportunity to be on a research scholarship at the School of International Relations at University of St-Andrews.<sup>1</sup> While being there, I became interested in the academic activities of the Center for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) within the School of International Relations. This center is a fascinating case study to reflect on the field of International Relations (IR), and more largely on academic practices in the Social sciences. Indeed, the CSTPV is characterized by practical, applied, and policy-oriented approaches to teaching and researching since it was primarily developed around higher education programs specifically built for practitioners.<sup>2</sup> This article suggests that the case of the CSTPV can inform our understanding of the lively 'Theory-Practice' debate in IR and other fields of social sciences.<sup>3</sup>

This debate has raised much attention in the last decades in IR and Political Science.<sup>4</sup> Most scholars relying on this dichotomy have used it to argue for more or less relation between academic IR and policy-practice. On the first hand, several scholars<sup>5</sup> have suggest to foster this relation or, in other words, to make IR scholarship more oriented toward policy-practice. Bruce W. Jentleson (2002) have for example justified such proposal by arguing: "it is hard to deny that contemporary political science and international relations as a discipline put limited value on policy

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the faculties and staff of the School of International Relations for their availability to answer my questions and assistance during my academic stay. Also, for helpful comments on earlier versions of this article, many thanks to Philippe Beaulieu-Brossard, Jean-François Bélanger, Jérémie Cornut, Erika Hubbard, and Nicholas Rengger.

<sup>2</sup> This character makes the CSTPV an original case since it has developed an exceptional array of education options for practitioners compared to most professional schools or research centers in IR. Comparable centers are rather focused on non-practitioners, full-time students. See for example the Member Schools of the Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs or, in terrorism studies, the Master of Counter-Terrorism Studies at Monash University.

<sup>3</sup> The reference to a single case study in this article is understood, as for other scholars in Social sciences (e.g. see Klotz & Prakash 2008; Merriam, 2009; and Sprinz & Wolinsky-Nahmias, 2004, Part 1), as an empirical frameworks providing relevant insights to complement large-number empirical studies on similar topics.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. see Booth, 1997; George, 1994; Jentleson, 2002; Jentleson & Ratner, 2011, Legpold & Nincic, 2001; Oren, 2009; Nye, 2008; Smith, 1997; Wallace, 1996; and Weiss & Kittikhoun, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. see George, 1994; Jentleson, 2002; Nincic & Legpold, 2000; Wallace, 1996; and Weiss & Kittikhoun, 2011.

relevance—too little, in my view, and the discipline suffers for it” (p. 169). Such a change would result in a capacity to ‘bridge the gap’ between theory and practice which would, it is argued, increase the usefulness of academic IR.

On the other hand, a second group of authors<sup>6</sup> have argued that IR scholars should be cautious about extensive engagement with policy-practice. In that sense, Christopher Hill (1994) explains: “The American model of close, interpenetrated relations between the universities and government is coming much closer to realization in Britain and many other states. But as it does so, the dangers of the US system, so brilliantly outlined by Hans Morgenthau in his criticisms of Lyndon Johnson during the Vietnam War, are approaching with it” (p. 3). With this position, scholars have therefore asserted the value of academic independence and integrity.

As this short review shows, this debate does not only concern the potential relation between academic IR and policy-practice. It is also related to the identity of academic IR itself. Indeed, the two aforementioned positions uphold different representations of IR which are supported by divergent principles and objectives for the field. Some of the previously listed authors made that clear by explicitly representing IR through dichotomous oppositions. Launching a fierce debate in British IR,<sup>7</sup> William Wallace (1996) for example asserted that “the justification for the place [the study of international relations] has gained in the university curriculum rests upon utility, not on aesthetics” (p. 301). This representation was more recently followed by numerous critiques towards either the lack of attention towards practical issues<sup>8</sup> or the growing interconnections between academic IR and politics or, more specifically, governmental, administrative and/or corporate actors.<sup>9</sup> Finally, such debate have been explained by a general representations of the academic field as “divided between those who regard themselves as real scholars partly because they do not get involved in contemporary affairs, and those who are scornful of the ‘ivory tower’ syndrome establishing itself in the social sciences” (Hill, 1994, p. 7). Without denying the accuracy of some of these representations, I suggest that a practical analysis of academic activities in IR can offer a significantly different outlook on the theory-practice debate.

This article asserts that this dichotomy epitomizes two different but interrelated ‘cultures of scholarship,’<sup>10</sup> i.e. approaches towards researching, producing, and diffusing knowledge. Incidentally, I suggest that this notion improves our understanding of the context within which the theory-practice debate is conducted and, most importantly, enables to challenge the oppositional representations used to represent academic knowledge. Like Ken Booth (1997) and Joseph Nye (2008) have already asserted, this analysis hence fosters an understanding of IR according to which theory and practice are intrinsically combined rather than opposed. To support this claim, this article uses a ‘praxiographic’ approaches (Bueger, 2011), or, in other words, analyzes academic practices and more particularly how scholars at the CSTPV combine a practical orientation with the use of theoretical knowledge in teaching, research, and knowledge diffusion practices. Doing so, this article provides an original perspective on the theory-practice debate in IR and contributes to the emerging field of disciplinary sociology in IR, which has applied the ‘practice turn’ framework to IR in order to understand how the field is constituted through diverse academic practices.<sup>11</sup> Finally, this work contribute to more general reflections on the way academic and scientific fields such as IR are developed through the mobilization of diverse forms of capital. Before engaging with the CSTPV case study, I provide explanations on the practical and theoretical cultures of scholarship in IR.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL APPARATUS: PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL CULTURES OF SCHOLARSHIP IN IR

On the first hand, a practical culture of scholarship can be characterized by its attention to specific cases of study, policy relevant work, as well as empirical and experience-based types of knowledge. Because it focuses on external practical problems, it can be sociologically associated (even if imperfectly) with a pragmatist approach to

<sup>6</sup> E.g. see Booth, 1997; Beshoff & Hill, 1994; Nygren, 1994; and Ish-Shalom, 2006, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., see Wallace, 1996; Booth, 1997; and Smith, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., see Jentleson & Ratner, 2011; Leggold & Nincic, 2001; and Wallace, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> E.g., see Aronowitz, 2001; Côté & Allahar, 2011; and Oren, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> This notion was introduced by C.P. Snow to represent the growing differences between Social sciences and Humanities within the university field (1993 [1959]). For a more recent and anthropological use of this notion, see Humphreys, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. see Bueger, 2012; D’Aoust, 2012; Grenier & Turenne Sjolander, 2013 [To be published]; Kristensen, 2012; and Waever, 1998.

academic work.<sup>12</sup> In IR, such a culture of scholarship is embodied by programs that focus on policy practices, direct work on arising international issues, and research solutions meant to manage such issues. These programs are generally identified as professional, applied, or policy-oriented. At the School of IR at University of St-Andrews, such a culture of scholarship is particularly embodied by the CSTPV.<sup>13</sup>

Applying this, practical culture of scholarship in IR appears relatively more case-related, empirical and short-term focused when compared to theoretical scholarship. But scholars using such an approach generally value “disciplinary objectives” (Grenier, 2012:, p. 11) such as policy and social relevance, application of academic knowledge to contemporary issues (in order to build predictive capabilities for example) and provision of information sought by external agencies and the public.<sup>14</sup> This culture of scholarship can be characterized by diverse normative, political or theoretical stances but share a relatively more outward-orientation (i.e. concerns with debates and issues relevant for external agencies, fields of policy practices and/or the society).

This approach has not only been used to promote the social value of IR scholarship but also to discipline the field according to particular objectives and to delimit the area of relevance of IR following practical or policy-practice lines. Karl Deutsch (1974) for example argued that “insofar as political science is a science, it is an applied one. Its tasks are practical, and its theories are both challenged and nourished by practice.” (in Nincic & Leggold, 2000, p. 1) Such disciplining practice has also been voiced through diverse dismissive and simplistic representations representing theoretically approaches as aesthetics (Wallace, 1996), akin to an ivory tower (Leggold & Nincic, 2001), “excessively insular and disconnected” (Jentleson, 2002, p. 170), scholastic (Wallace, 1996; and Meehan, in Nincic & Leggold, 2000) or “trivial and/or irrelevant” (Palmer, 1980, p. 355). As I show through the following analysis, such dividing representations of IR misses the fact that IR academic work, even that which is practically oriented, is a result of a combination of both practical and theoretical knowledge.

On the other hand, a theoretical culture of scholarship is characterized by the development of more long-term perspectives, theoretical or paradigmatically-based knowledge, and representational framework of understanding. Guzzini (2001) explains: “In its classical explanatory sense, social science theories are the result of knowledge giving a common, more general and coherent explanation for a variety of specified cases” (p. 99). A sociological perspective on such a theoretical orientation towards knowledge shows that it is characterized by particular normative stances and a relatively more inward-orientation (i.e. giving higher value and importance to debates and issues primarily pertaining to the academic world).

At the School of IR of the University of St-Andrews, such culture of scholarship is for example embodied by the Master’s degree in International Political Theory. This program aims at providing students: “with new conceptual tools for understanding the international system, and (...) the ability to situate political thought beyond the boundaries of the sovereign state.” (School of International Relations, 2012a) Theoretical knowledge and scholarship has been promoted for two main reasons in IR and beyond. First, it is considered useful for its analytical breath, i.e. its capacity to analyze issues that are repeatedly emerging (George, 1994, p. ix). In that sense, this type of knowledge represents an “academic comparative advantage” (Hill, 1994, p. 20). On the other hand, theoretical, generic or more ‘disembedded’ inquiry into the social world has been advocated to maintain the necessary distance from practical issue in order to preserve academic neutrality and objectivity<sup>15</sup> and prevent “the misuse of scientific knowledge for the pursuit of political agendas” (Weiss & Kittikhoun, 2011, p. 1). The main arguments of scholars to refrain from policy-practice engagement are consequently the maintenance of intellectual integrity and rigor.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> On pragmatism in IR, see for example Friedrichs & Kratochwil, 2009; Hellman, 2009; Sil, 2009; and Sil & Katzenstein, 2010. Although, this general association should be limited to the conception of appropriate objectives for academic work and not extend to the more fundamental pragmatist understanding of knowledge validation (or, in other words, the pragmatist epistemological principles).

<sup>13</sup> See CSTPV, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> E.g., see George, 1994; Putnam, 2003; Nye, 2008; and Wallace, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> This has most famously been argued by Max Weber according to whom science and politics are different vocation, abide by different codes of moral responsibility and hence need to remain separate to insure that scientific knowledge is not used for political objectives (see Gerth & Wright Mills, 1948).

<sup>16</sup> See Hill, 1994, p. 16; or Nye (2008) who refers to these two arguments as the “corruption-relevance tradeoff” and the “rigor-relevance trade-off” (p. 650).



IR scholars have also used such a perspective to discipline the field. A recent conversation I witnessed between two IR scholars illustrates how this practice is used. Following a presentation during which the first scholar presented the results from a comparative analysis of graduate programs in IR, the second scholar argued that some of the selected programs (professional Master programs) were not suitable cases studies since they were not part of the discipline of IR. The first scholar responded that despite the fact that the programs offered within these schools did not have the same theoretical content or did not give as much attention to theoretical knowledge as conventional 'research programs,' they were indeed aimed at teaching and diffusing knowledge on international relations. She/he also insisted on the fact that universities were increasingly creating programs that were oriented towards professional or vocational objectives and that these programs could not be excluded from the 'legitimate academia' on such disciplinary basis. Not without insisting on the important intellectual divide between these types of programs, the two scholars finally agreed that, from a sociological point of view, it was possible to compare such programs.

This academic conversation enables to illustrate the struggle over what is IR and how an academic position can be used to exclude more practical scholarly approaches. Incidentally, it also shows how the theory-practice dichotomy is used to foster opposition and discipline within IR. This is unfortunate since this field might be much more complex and interesting than this opposition suggests and a theory-practice combination can reveal much more productive. In the following section, I illustrate how the oppositional stance regarding theoretical and practical approaches to scholarship is misleading by analyzing the combination of practical and theoretical approaches in the CSTPV academic practices.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL CULTURES OF SCHOLARSHIP AT THE CSTPV

Theory and practice in teaching: CSTPV offers two types of study programs: an online undergraduate certificate in 'Terrorism Studies' and a Master program (which is offered on both part and full time basis, as well as on or off campus).<sup>17</sup> This diversity and flexibility of educative formats enables the Center to register full-time students but also a significant number of part-time or full-time students-practitioners.<sup>18</sup> This is an essential aspect of the CSTPV's academic activities since it fosters the practical orientation of teaching programs (to answer to practitioners' needs and questions) and represent an innovative practice within the field.

The CSTPV offers one among five 'topical' Master programs at the School of IR.<sup>19</sup> Exceptionally within the School, it has autonomy over the registration process for its graduate program. In 2011-2012, it had 63 registered Master students, among which 13 were residential<sup>20</sup> and 50 were part-time, distance learners' postgraduate (Master) students-practitioners.<sup>21</sup> Notwithstanding the possible students-practitioners among the full-time Master students, this illustrates that a majority of the graduate students at the CSTPV are practitioners-students.<sup>22</sup> This demonstrates the practical orientation of the CSTPV with regards to its teaching activities and indicates the particular character of the Center within the School of IR (and the field more generally).

We should wonder if the CSTPV's orientation confirms or contradicts the opposition between theoretical and practical approaches in IR. To answer this question, I have assessed the content of the Master program and discussed this issue with different Faculty and staff members involved in the teaching activities at the CSTPV.

While most of the courses available at the CSTPV Master Program are directed toward issue or case-based topics, one of its four main modules is dedicated to theory and methods and more precisely towards "definitional,

<sup>17</sup> See Terrorism Studies, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> While analyzing the teaching activities at the CSTPV, I focus on the Master programs both within the CSTPV and the School of IR more largely in order to have a relatively circumscribed and clearer ground of comparison.

<sup>19</sup> Namely the Master's Program in 'Terrorism Studies'. The other Master's programs of the School are in 'International Political Theory,' 'International Security Studies,' 'Middle East and Central Asian Security Studies,' 'Peace and Conflict Studies.' (School of International Relations, 2012b)

<sup>20</sup> For a comparison, there were a total of 80 residential students in all Master's programs at the School of IR in 2011-12.

<sup>21</sup> By this I mean students that, previously to their enrolment in the graduate programs, were actively engaged in the job market on a long-term job tract.

<sup>22</sup> It must also be noted that the online Certificate in Terrorism Studies is also an important provider of education for practitioners since it trains more than 500 students (mostly practitioners-students) every year. I decided not to include this program in my analysis since it would have been difficult to compare it with other programs.

conceptual, typological and theoretical issues” in the subfield of terrorism studies (Terrorism Studies, 2009). Moreover, the list of optional courses indicates several overlaps and exchanges between the CSTPV and the rest of the School, with many of the courses available for the CSTPV Master students showing an explicit theoretical orientation.<sup>23</sup>

Theoretical knowledge is not limited to this explicit presence. According to various interlocutors at the CSTPV, every course needs to provide background knowledge, i.e. multifaceted historical understanding and analytical perspectives. These perspectives provide the “big picture” or, in other words, the capacity to make sense of a lot of empirical data and of long-term social and historical processes. Such capacity can only be provided by the constitution of a large theoretical and generic repertoire of knowledge on the issue under analysis. The importance of such form of knowledge was illustrated by one of my interlocutor at the CSTPV when she/he asserted that: “The Center could not function without theory! It could not, in fact, provide courses and scholarship.”<sup>24</sup> Theory is hence essential to support issue-based and practical teaching since, as a CSTPV faculty explained, an engagement with the challenges faced by students-practitioners could not be possible without theoretical, generic, and analytical knowledge about the field and its issues. This demonstrates, from the point of view of teaching practices, how theoretical and practical approaches are combined, instead of opposed, in the field of IR.

Theory and practice in research: The CSTPV is one of five research centers associated with the School of IR at the University of St-Andrews. It currently hosts five doctoral and postdoctoral Research Fellows (CSTPV, 2012). Research topics listed by CSTPV Faculty members are for example the history of terrorism and political violence, the analysis of diverse forms of terrorism and counter-terrorism, the treatment of terrorist acts’ victims, and the study of behavioral criminology.<sup>25</sup>

According to staff and Faculty members at the Center, research projects can either be guided by specific requests from funding agencies<sup>26</sup> or initiated by researchers themselves. The Center’s staff and Faculty members explained that when answering requests from funding agencies, faculties were generally providing a specific expertise needed by practitioners. More precisely, one CSTPV Faculty member described academic expertise as the capacity to provide specialized, generic, and background knowledge, to define concepts, to analyze socio-political dynamics, and to put events into perspectives. Such expertise is developed through long term engagement, field experiences, and studies on particular issues, a work which practitioners do not have the time to do.<sup>27</sup>

Detailing how academic researchers engage with policy-practitioners within research projects helps to illustrate how theoretical knowledge is an intrinsic part of the academic expertise and of what we can call practical or policy-oriented scholarship. As my explanations highlighted, theoretical knowledge and background is essential for CSTPV faculties’ research activities. As one of my interlocutor interestingly pointed out, the practically oriented scholars work is mainly focused on using available theories to analyze and understand emerging issues. That could be distinguished from the work of more theoretically oriented scholars who would give more attention to the development of new theories or to perfect existing ones. From this point of view, practical and theoretical cultures of scholarship appear different but intrinsically linked in IR. Acknowledging this should enable IR scholars to provide more accurate representation of the field and to foster more productive relations between its diverse trends.

Theory and practice when sharing knowledge with the public: The CSTPV also plays an active role in diffusing knowledge to the public. As several staff and faculties at the School of IR and CSTPV explained, his role

<sup>23</sup> E.g. IR 5403 Political Philosophy and World Order; and IR 5406 Theories of Friendship and Enmity.

<sup>24</sup> Comments collected during the summer 2012 from CSTPV’s Faculty and staff members.

<sup>25</sup> As these research topics illustrate (with the exception of the history of terrorism and political violence), research at the CSTPV follow our definition of a practical culture of scholarship, i.e. it is relatively applied, issue-based, and policy-oriented.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. the Economic Social Research Council, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the British Academy and the European Union.

<sup>27</sup> Weiss & Kittikhoun (2011) recently described the possible contribution of scholars to policy practice as a “capacity to address the specific knowledge needs of practitioners through the generation of new policy ideas; constitutive localization; validation and legitimization of government ideas and policies; and occasionally dissent” (p. 2). This description reveals a difference in the level of engagement toward policy-practice. Hence an important distinction should be made between institutions preoccupied by, on one side, *advising* and *informing* practitioners and policy-makers and, on the other, guiding and writing policies. According to Faculty members, the CSTPV is an example of the first. Thanks to Pr. Nicholas Rengger for pointing out this significant distinction.

has been increasingly important since 2001. Indeed, after the 9/11 events (and other events involving terrorism in the following years), the Center received an increasing number of requests for interviews and conferences on the emerging issues related to international terrorism by media and public entities. According to one CSTPV faculty, media would want to have a “full background analysis” of the situation from an academic expert following any major national or international event involving terrorism or political violence. Such analysis would have to answer questions such as “Why did this happen?”; “How did it happen?”, and “What can be learned from it?”.

Accordingly, providing such informed comments and expertise to the media represents a social responsibility of scholars. Although, the practice of such academic responsibility could not be achieved without at least implicit references to theoretical, analytic and background knowledge of related academic subfields (such as terrorism and political violence for the CSTPV Faculty members). So despite the issue-based character of most public contributions, theoretical knowledge and perspectives about these issues are essential. It is only through the development and use of such knowledge that one can analyze contemporary events, provide long-termed perspectives, and embody what we conceive as academic expertise.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This article explained how the theory and practice debate can be understood through the definition of two distinct but interrelated ‘cultures of scholarship’ in IR, namely practical and theoretical cultures of scholarship. Accordingly, these two cultures of scholarship represent and promote particular ‘disciplinary objectives’ like social relevance or rigor and academic integrity. Following this, the assessment of CSTPV academic practices reveals the role of theoretical knowledge in teaching, research practices as well as in the public role of academics. This sociological analysis has important consequences for our reflection about the field of IR and its disciplinary development. More precisely, it illustrates that theoretical and practical cultures of scholarship are inherently combined in the way scholarship is daily practiced, even in practically-oriented contexts such as the CSTPV. Accordingly, oppositional representation of theoretical and practical scholarly approaches to IR, often referring to the theory-practice dichotomy, is not justified.

Rather than suggesting a division between these two cultures of scholarship, which more than often results in a struggle for disciplinary authority, the analysis of the CSTPV academic activities illustrates that academic practices such as teaching, research, and the public diffusion of knowledge combine theoretical and practical cultures of scholarship. The combination of practicality and theoretical understanding could, in that way, be seen as a way to build IR both on a capacity to be socially relevant and to develop academic rigor and integrity. This pluralist representation of IR, even if fraught with tension, is nonetheless “consistent with the values most dear to our work as scholars” (Jentleson & Ratner, 2011, p. 8).

The study presented in this article is preliminary and necessarily provides limited evidence of the main claim. The analysis should be expanded in order to identify the theories and approaches that are favored within practically-oriented forms of scholarship and to include a larger number of cases studies. While acknowledging these shortages, this study nevertheless makes an important contribution to IR literature and to the sociology of social sciences by illustrating the mixed character of academic practices in institutions like the CSTPV as it combines, rather than opposes, theoretical and practical cultures of scholarship.



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