



Policy Relevant Scholarship? The Value of Creating, Framing and Storytelling

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 **EU-LISTCO**

Europe's External Action and the Dual Challenges
of Limited Statehood and Contested Orders

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ABSTRACT

Once upon a time, academia and practice were joined at the hip, but as years went by, a yawning gap began dividing the two worlds. Today, while occasions of contact between academia and practice exist, they remain mainly ad hoc and superficial. To bridge the gap between academia and practice, many have called for policy relevant scholarship. But this misses the point: academics are and should continue to be academics, much like practitioners are and should continue to be practitioners. It is not up to the academic to come up with detailed policy proposals. They often lack the technical expertise, the bureaucratic experience or political instinct to know the specific what, when and how needed. Yet the academics' contribution to policy-making can be immense if they continue to be academics: using their unique skill set but with an eye for the concepts, the framing and the story-telling that are so essential to good policy-making.

KEYWORDS: academia, framing, practice, policy, think tank

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THE GAP BETWEEN ACADEMIA AND PRACTICE

Once upon a time, academia and practice were joined at the hip. There was an entire generation of foreign policy scholars who served in foreign services in the inter-war and early post-war years. Back then, it was normal for academics to voice publicly their policy views, as much as it was common for scholars to move to public service and return to academia thereafter. As years went by, a yawning gap began dividing the worlds of academia and practice (George 1993; Leggold and Ninic 2001).

The size of the gap differs markedly from place to place. In the United States, the transmission belt from academia to practice, while not massively populated, is still up and running. One only needs to think of monumental figures such as Henry Kissinger or Zbigniew Brzezinski, or more recently Charlie Kupchan, Joe Nye, Anne-Marie Slaughter and Stephen Krasner to appreciate the role that academics have played in US government. Not so in Europe. Examples do exist, particularly in the United Kingdom, and to a lesser extent in France and Germany, as attested by the career paths of Jean Pisani-Ferry from academia to practice or the opposite by Robert Cooper and Wolfgang Ischinger. But by and large these are exceptions that confirm the rule in Europe: the worlds of academia and practice remain compartmentalized and largely non-communicating.

This does not mean that occasions for contact between these parallel worlds do not exist in Europe. Universities, not to mention think tanks, bend over backwards to ensure the participation of heads of state, ministers, commissioners and other senior officials in their public events; and scholars and analysts cherish the opportunity to interview officials when writing their academic or think pieces, all the more so with the practice turn in IR scholarship (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014). Likewise, national ministries and parliaments, much like Commission services and the European Parliament, regularly reach out to academia, think tanks and non-governmental organizations through public consultations or private briefings; while cash-strapped ministries increasingly sub-contract to think tanks projects they no longer have the human resources to manage.

But contact between academia and practice remains ad hoc and superficial in Europe. Senior officials normally attend academic or think tank conferences with prepared speeches, racing for the door as soon as their session is over to attend more urgent official matters. Scholars and analysts reach out to practitioners to seek empirical evidence for their academic theses or propose pre-cooked policy recommendations to them. On the few occasions in which deeper exchange occurs, dialogue is generally valued by European academics and practitioners alike. But those moments are invariably rare.

This is one of the underlying rationales and perhaps the greatest value added of EU LISTCO, which aims precisely at bridging the gap between academia and practice by embedding researchers in different European ministries of foreign affairs and the European External Action Service on the key themes of state fragility and conflict resolution in the EU's troubled surrounding regions.

But should the gap be bridged? If so how?

SHOULD THE GAP BE BRIDGED?

Lamenting this “gap”, a branch of literature has made the case for policy relevant research (George 1993; Leppgold and Ninic 2001; Krasner 2009). It claims that “relevant” scholarship not only is not worse but may even be better than “disinterested” scholarship.

The risks involved should not be belittled. When academics enter, advice or inform government being driven by their academic theories, much damage can be done. One only needs to think of the (mis)use made of “just war” or “democracy promotion” theories to legitimize military interventions to realize the dangers involved (Ish-Shalom 2006). By reverse, there are real risks to academic integrity when speaking “with” rather than “to” power. When the scholar speaks to power, publishing her academic findings that may or may not have policy implications, integrity is safeguarded. When instead scholars step into the world of practice, they lose their academic virginity, acquiring a stake in the interpretation of history they make. In doing so, the search for relevance can compromise the quality of academic knowledge, as scholars trim their academic sails to accommodate prevailing political winds. Isolation in the ivory tower can serve as a buffer against these temptations.

However, my personal journey as an academic and think tanker temporarily stepping into the world of politics and institutions has persuaded me of the value of contamination between the worlds of academia and practice. The risks involved are there, but with due caution they are well worth taking. This is because the scholar and the practitioner go about their work by drawing from the “embedded capital” of their personal and professional backgrounds (Nye 2008). When the scholar steps into the shoes of the practitioner, she will bring to the job the accumulated intellectual capital acquired through her academic training and intellectual capital which the practitioner does not possess, as much as the reverse holds true. The academic will likely not have time to nourish such capital during a stint in the chaotic world of practice, but she will acquire a different kind of knowledge, notably of the haphazardness of the policy-making machine. This different kind of knowledge can then be transmitted back to academia through writing and teaching when her time in government comes to an end.

HOW CAN ACADEMIA CONTRIBUTE TO PRACTICE?

If a case is to be made for “bridging the gap”, how should such bridge be built? The instinctive answer, discussed in the literature (Krasner 2009; Nye 2008) suggests that the academic should produce “policy-relevant” scholarship. But how can the academic produce “relevant” work?

The answer normally takes the form of the production of policy briefs drawn from academic papers, in which the academic summarises in a few pages a 10,000 word or so academic paper and tags on to it at the end a list of “policy recommendations”. The outputs of Horizon 2020 projects and the myriad of “policy brief” series such projects produce vividly demonstrate how academics normally interpret the meaning of “relevance”.

This, in my view, almost invariably misses the point. When academics seek relevance by concocting policy recommendations, their impact is typically negligible. Unless such recommendations are

produced in the right format, at the right time, and fortuitously ends up in the right hands, their impact is close to nil (Krasner 2009; Nye 2008). Plus, when it comes to the nitty gritty of the policy process rarely does the academic have sufficient insider information to know precisely what lies in the realm of the possible, and therefore which are the specific buttons to press to articulate a recommendation that effectively touches the right cords. Insider knowledge and experience of the policy-making “garbage can” (Krasner 2009) is essential to make policy proposals that are likely to see the light of day. At most, think tankers can and should strive to develop such knowledge so as to connect the ivory tower of academia to the convulsed world of practice.

Far more than through her recommendations, the scholar can be not only “relevant” but even “essential” to good policy-making through the elaboration of concepts, the framing of debates and story-telling.

First, practitioners are constantly on the look-out for appealing concepts that can capture a policy objective, instrument or approach. Yet they have precious little time to elaborate such concepts in their chaotic day-to-day work. No wonder that when appealing ideas are developed by academics, practitioners eagerly jump on these, while often reinterpreting them to better fit policy realities. One only needs to think of how European Union practitioners have adopted concepts such as “normative power” or “resilience” to highlight this point. Both concepts have captured policy-makers’ imagination. Practitioners are not necessarily aware of the academic literature on these subjects. But having been exposed to them, perhaps only superficially, they have picked on and internalized them. They did so because within the policy-making machinery the direction of travel was moving in the same direction in any case but did so as a consequence of practice and without a powerful idea at its helm. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, at the height of the “international liberal order, the EU for instance very much viewed itself as a force for good in the world. The notion of Normative Power well captured this self-perception and was eagerly endorsed by several Commissioners at the time. Likewise, the notion of resilience has resonated too. Once used in official circles exclusively to discuss food security, as the neighbourhood started shaking – if not falling apart altogether –, a broader understanding of resilience captured policy-makers’ sense of where they were headed and what they sought to achieve. In short, practitioners have picked on and amply used concepts that capture their imagination. These concepts have the merit of distilling what the EU instinctively thinks it is and wants, without having been hitherto articulated clearly. In other words, these concepts generally do not induce practitioners to be or to do what is alien to them. However, by employing such concepts the practitioners’ views of what the EU is and tries to do are moulded and partially reinterpreted. When the practitioner is exposed to an academic concept that strikes the right cords, not only will that concept be used, but by using it in speech acts and documents, the academic concept will further strengthen a particular identity and/or course of policy action.

Second and related, academia is essential to the framing of policy debates. Such framing determines the realm of possible policy approaches, actions and responses. A case in point is the “interests versus values” debate in European foreign policy. Up until when the academic community was bogged down in the dichotomous “interests versus values” debate broadly triggered by the “normative power Europe” argument (Manners 2002), the policy community followed suit. Interests and values were presented as distinct notions. While on paper and in public speeches EU officials repeatedly argued that interests and values went hand-in-hand, in practice they were ready to admit that the former often trumped the latter. After the dichotomy came under attack notably by social constructivist scholars (Diez 2013), the approach was shed

by practitioners too. The EU Global Strategy for instance only lists the EU's interests arguing that 'our fundamental values are embedded in our interests' (EU HRVP 2016: 1). This has meant on the one hand that the Union is no longer shy in talking about its interests, adding clarity and a degree of honesty in its relations with third countries. On the other hand, it has induced practitioners to articulate their interests more coherently with what their proclaimed values are.

Finally, the academic can contribute to policy-making through her story-telling. The practitioner working on a policy document generally ends up compiling lists of things done or to be done. At most the list is ordered by way of priorities. There is rarely a convincing story or an argument presented which makes the "to do" list convincing, compelling if not outright indisputable. This is where the academic can usefully step in. Rather than providing specific recommendations which require an insider's knowledge of technicalities, context and timing, the academic is trained to elaborate arguments. These stories need not conclude with specific technical recommendations but they do potentially open the way to policy orientations within which the practitioner can then articulate detailed proposals. Those specific recommendations will still need to be presented at the right time, to the right person and in the right way: a skill set which only the practitioner and not the academic has. But if preceded by a compelling story explaining a policy problem and the possible way out of it, those same recommendations acquire an entirely different solidity, appeal and momentum. It is in this crucial step preceding policy formulation that the academic's input can be invaluable. Nowhere has this been clearer than in the current debates about European defence. Whereas the academic is not in the position to make detailed proposals regarding the permanent structured cooperation or the establishment of the European defence fund, academic debates on multipolarity, on the risks of divergence in the transatlantic relationship, or on the escalation of conflicts and crises in and around Europe have certainly galvanised EU practitioners to elaborate and implement specific policy proposals.

The gap between academia and practice lamentably exists, but seeking to bridge it through policy relevant scholarship misses the point. Academics are and should continue to be academics, much like practitioners are and should continue to be practitioners. It is not up to the academic to come up with detailed policy proposals. They often lack the technical expertise, the bureaucratic experience or political instinct to know the specific what, when and how needed for effective policy proposals. Yet the academic's contribution to policy-making can be immense if she continues to be an academic: using her unique skill set but with an eye for the concepts, the framing and the story-telling that are so essential to good policy-making. By temporarily embedding scholars within the European foreign policy machinery, EU LISTCO provides a unique opportunity for such scholars not only to grasp the complexity of foreign policy-making, but also to better understand how to generate new ideas, frame debates and present arguments that can be genuinely meaningful to better policy-making in Europe.

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ABOUT EU-LISTCO RESEARCH

EU-LISTCO investigates the challenges posed to European foreign policy by identifying risks connected to areas of limited statehood and contested orders. Through the analysis of the EU Global Strategy and Europe's foreign policy instruments, the project assesses how the preparedness of the EU and its member states can be strengthened to better anticipate, prevent and respond to threats of governance breakdown and to foster resilience in Europe's neighbourhoods. Continuous knowledge exchange between researchers and foreign policy practitioners is at the cornerstone of EU-LISTCO. Since the project's inception, a consortium of fourteen leading universities and think tanks have been working together to develop policy recommendations for the EU's external action toolbox, in close coordination with European decision-makers. The EU-LISTCO Policy Papers are peer-reviewed research papers based on findings from the project.

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