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Forum: "A Bridge Too Far"? On the Impact of Worldly Relevance on International Relations

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FORUM

"A Bridge too far"? On the Impact of Worldly Relevance on International Relations

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Introduction: "A Bridge Too Far"?

   Andrew R. Hom

Discussions about building bridges between the academic field of International Relations (IR) and the wider world assume that scholars should influence policy and decision-making or provide traction on practical problems. IR scholars also typically share a commitment to knowledge that contributes to less rather than more violence and suffering. These objectives

are often operationalized in a conventional and idealized story where the application of sound knowledge, developed independently within IR, helps resolve political dilemmas, alleviate suffering, or avert catastrophes in the wider world (e.g. Nincic and Lepgold 2000; Lepgold and Nincic 2002; Nye 2008; Desch 2015). In this narrative, the primary challenge involves building better bridges between academia and that world by improving the transmission or digestibility of academic knowledge to practitioners (Desch 2015:386). Seeking relevance in this way is also thought to produce better scholarship (see Lepgold and Nincic 2002:2–5; Nye 2008:597, 602).[1] In other words, 'good' IR – that is, scientifically "sound" and policy relevant knowledge (Desch 2015:386, 378; Lepgold and Nincic 2002:ix, 185; Nye 2008:597) – is good for the world, and pursuing it is good for IR.

However laudable these desires might be, they often conflict. Accusations that IR says "more and more about less and less" (Nye 2008:602) complement charges of "arid and trivial" scholarship (Lepgold and Nincic 2002:3) that prefers "technique" over "relevance" (Desch 2015). And despite the significant influence of realism, game theory, democratization, and the democratic peace on political practitioners (see Lepgold and Nincic 2002:2–3, 59; Nye 2008:596–97), international politics remains nasty, brutish, and short on scientific improvement.

This persistent mismatch between intentions and outcomes problematizes key presumptions of the idealized bridge-building story. First, IR may not, in fact, be good for the world. Second, IR scholars' objectives do not necessarily equate with "usefulness" for practitioners. Third, if good IR is *not necessarily* good for the world, is it productive to organize the field around such ideals of policy relevance?

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[1] Notably, these arguments depend on conflating "better" with greater relevance. The recent Lacour scandal in political science shows how pursuing relevance can also encourage unsound research (see Carey and Belluck 2015).

IR scholars have not engaged these issues. Lamentations about policy relevance shortfalls and ways to fix them flow from and reproduce idealized accounts of relevance (Nincic and Lepgold 2000; Lepgold and Nincic 2002; Nye 2008; Desch 2015), vastly outnumbering critical reflections on the topic.[2] They also completely neglect our third concern: *Within* IR, what is the impact of this understanding of relevance? How does it inflect disciplinary conduct? How does it shape scholars' views of their roles within and beyond the academy? And what vocational conversations does it preclude or marginalize? To redress this oversight, instead of policy relevance this forum focuses on the *scholarly implications of worldly relevance*.

This shift from "policy" to "worldly" captures two key points. First, the forum understands IR as a scholarly disciplinary practice located *within* the wider world of international politics. Because social science cannot decisively isolate its subjects and objects of inquiry, IR is part of the world it studies, even if that world also extends *beyond* it. This is no simple matter of mobility between academia and government or policy sectors, but rather one of thorough cross-contamination. As several contributors discuss below (p. 9, 16, 24, 37-38), IR forms an "epistemic community" with political practitioners, drawing conceptual inspiration and research programs from political phenomena while developing knowledge that is intrinsically and often intensely political. Even if the conduct and style of IR differs from other political practices, this does not render scholarship independent of them. So while our ability to influence concrete policy waxes and wanes, the world of international politics is always already with IR, with the implication that there can be no clean and discrete transmission of knowledge to a world from which knowledge was never fully apart. There is no 'gap' that IR must 'bridge' – rather, different knowledge claims co-mingle with their object domains to varying degrees, which scholars and practitioners might adjust but never

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[2] For a rare exception, see (Hill 1994).

eliminate. Because IR is intrinsically worldly in this way, *all* thinking is provincial and political.

Second, "worldly" evokes critical projects of "worlding" and "worldism" (Pettman 2005; Agathangelou and Ling 2009), which show how knowledge claims propound worlds of their own and encourage scholars to be "mindful" of what sort of world their scholarship produces (Penttinen 2013:106). Because international politics is a constellation of differences rather than a singularity, IR must be "worlded" to make room for those subjects traditionally occluded (Pettman 2005:viii–ix). This results in "worldism" – the purposeful embrace of numerous worlds of multiple subjectivities as an end in itself (Agathangelou and Ling 2009:85). So even while discussing mainstream IR topics (see below), forum contributors identify multiple worlds beyond policy or high politics where academic and other political practices interpenetrate. By "worldly relevance", then, the forum treats IR as *full of different worlds* with which it has a co-constitutive relationship. A key consequence of this is that while ideals of policy relevance permit an unreflexive view of knowledge production as a straightforward, independent endeavor, "worldly relevance" *demands* scholarly reflexivity about the overlaps between knowledge and power, theory and practice, and IR and its wider worlds.[3]

The forum illuminates important issues that these dynamics raise for academic conduct and explores opportunities to grapple with and, perhaps, transgress them. However, while other worlding/worldism proposals explicitly expand IR's boundaries, contributors here destabilize its center by drawing on experiences with conventional IR topics: the military, economics, nuclear weapons, realism, democracy, and social science. This delimited

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[3] "Worldly" also acknowledges that the parameters and particular meanings of both IR and its worlds are different for different people.

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focus is a tactical move: by addressing traditional issue areas where idealized visions of policy relevance thrive, the forum takes aim at IR's 'hard core'.

The forum's makeup also provides a 'hard case' for idealized assumptions about relevance. Occupying tenure (track) or research posts at research institutions in the global north and especially the United States, contributors enjoy comparatively privileged positions within the wider international studies community. Theirs are just the sorts of jobs that should enjoy relevance: they *can* partake of its benefits but are not *dependent* on them like those in think tanks, externally-funded posts, or differently structured academies. And yet neither are they senior academics in the most influential departments, leaving them relatively free from the burdens of *following* agendas or *setting* them. It is therefore conspicuous that they identify so many issues below. If well-positioned scholars struggle with the implications of worldly – and in some cases, specifically policy – relevance, how much more do colleagues facing no tenure track, no prioritization of research, heavy government involvement and "impact agendas", and other structural, demographic, and/or ideological constraints?

Finding out requires further dialogue. There is a wide range of important scholarship not included here – social movements, LGBT approaches, postcolonialism and critical IPE, among others, as well as perspectives from different institutional and structural positions.[4] Scholars working in these contexts are doubly marginalized: first, by working in unconventional knowledge paradigms and often with less job security; second, by addressing alternative intellectual and practitioner communities using different ideas of what constitutes a scholarly contribution. The following discussion therefore offers a provocation – not (even close to) the final word but rather an introductory set of reflections intended to expose telling tensions in IR's hard core and thereby invigorate further inquiry and a more worlded conversation about worldly relevance.

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[4] The original roundtables that motivated this forum reflected some of this diversity.

The forum discloses the hard case of worldly relevance in IR's hard core as follows. Having taught extra classes to military professionals, Brent Steele unpacks pervasive, layered incentives to "sell out" and their implications for academic freedom. Recounting a World Bank consulting gig, Patrick Jackson highlights the challenges that scholars face positioning themselves in policy settings. Both pieces emanate from the experience of being called out of the typical classroom to a wider world of teaching but ultimately defend the worldly relevance of pedagogy.

Finding persistent power and gender disparities in both academic and political "nuclear clubs", Saara Särmä explores collage, satire, and online activism as novel ways of engaging nuclear politics, both academically and politically. Harry Gould shows how a "dusty books" genealogy of prudence can contribute relevant insights precisely by *refusing* to build bridges to the wider world. In both cases, it is the scholar's ability – enabled and enacted in different ways – to escape conventional ideals of relevance that opens up novel forms of impact.

The final two pieces address methodological and vocational considerations. Recognizing concepts' intrinsic potential for political havoc, Piki Ish-Shalom proposes a balance between "zooming in" to refine concepts and "zooming out" to assess their potential consequences. This is not a 'one-and-done' liability check but a continuous method of *minimal* vigilance. Finally, Daniel Levine argues that human finitude and the tendency toward reification necessitate an identity shift for IR, from a technical science of the "good life" toward the use of craft to expose "wrong life". In both, the move from engineering ideals to more Hippocratic principles flows from a realistic assessment of just what sort of knowledge it is *possible* for IR to produce and, by implication, for just what IR can be useful.

Drawing widespread pertinence from individual experience, the contributors speak to different moments – teaching, consulting, advocacy, research, method, self-understanding –

in the academic process where worldly relevance and vocational conduct intermingle especially closely. They also point to different views of what sort of scholar-in-the-world one can be, including educator, expert, activist, bookworm, methodologist, and self-critic. Their reflections significantly complicate ideals of scientists transmitting hermetic and reliable knowledge to practitioners. That these emanate from privileged subject positions and conventional research topics only further highlights the narrowness of IR's conventional view of relevance. Taken together, they emphasize deep skepticism about ideals of practical relevance and usefulness; the importance of personal-professional experience as a "powerful marker of location and interest" (Pettman 2005:xi), if not a fully generalizable datum;[5] and concern for recovering the oft-forgotten labor of teaching as a most worldly, impactful, and relevant scholarly activity.[6]

The forum thus exposes a host of under-scrutinized issues with how we 'do IR'. If there is an overarching lesson, it is the importance of acknowledging IR's natural messiness and becoming more self-reflexive about the consequences of this. Such is the primary motivation (or anxiety) driving Steele's, Jackson's, and Särmä's personal contemplations, the implicit conclusion of Gould's scholasticism, the explicit objective of Ish-Shalom's method, and the ground for Levine's vocational vision. Rather than sublimating the challenges of worldly relevance in fervent tales of good science applied to happy effect, this forum takes the critical step of *engaging* tensions between IR's inherent worldliness and the danger of pushing "a bridge too far" (Ryan 2007).

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[5] Although limits of generalizability do not prevent them from highlighting the contingencies of bridge-building – indeed, it is in the details that issues bedeviling academic practice most clearly resolve.
[6] The only contributor who does not address pedagogy is Särmä, who has not had as much opportunity to teach as others.

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