

Connecting Scholars and Practitioners: Bringing together willing hands to create the “Third UN”

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Reflecting my past ACUNS experience—as executive director and board chair as well as editor of Global Governance—led me when I was elected president of the International Studies Association (ISA) to select the theme of “Theory vs. Practice? Connecting Scholars and Practitioners” for the upcoming 51st Annual Convention in February 2010 in New Orleans. This is the first ISA gathering that will focus on what always has been the bread and butter of the Academic Council on the UN System. ACUNS was founded in 1987 to foster links between scholars of international organization and law, on the one hand, and individuals who have fled the ivory tower for the dirty-fingernails world of international public policy, on the other hand.

The so-called chasm between these two groups in world politics—those who observe and analyze a subject and those who practice it—need not be as deep and mysterious as we often think. To most scholars, the development of theory, regardless of its relevance outside academia, is highly valued. Simplification and generalization are of the essence. Social scientists ask the “so what” question, but they do so usually in the context of theory-building and not because an answer is actually necessary. Some scholars might even go so far as to deny that theories and methodologies need be applied outside of the academy. The inappropriate use or misuse of scientific knowledge for the pursuit of political agendas is cited as one reason to assume the role of the detached critic who remains on the sidelines and away from the policy fray. Someone like Harvard’s Stanley Hoffman has meticulously kept his distance from practitioners, especially in Washington, even though virtually everything he has written is of consequence to decision- and policy-makers. Indeed, he hopes that they will occasionally read what he has written.

At the same time, for most practitioners and activists, the word “theory” is associated with abstraction and irrelevance for their day-to-day activities. Every situation seems *sui generis*, and thus generalizations can cause more problems than they solve. Even if theories offer explanations for practitioners, the “unreal” assumptions and simplicity of many theories are not useful when events are unpredictable and do not follow the neat patterns that are thought to be necessary to qualify as “parsimonious.” Often practitioners worry about the sources that form the basis for some theoretical propositions; if these sources are unreliable, flawed conclusions follow. The seemingly ever unresolved character of academic debates and knowledge makes theoretical findings difficult to apply in practice.

These stereotypes appear extreme because visible scholars of international studies (from Henry Kissinger to Condoleezza Rice) have often changed academic robes for prominent policy-making or decision-making positions. Yet Harvard's Joseph Nye just lamented in *The Washington Post* in April that the gap between the two worlds is actually growing—with academic theorizing saying “more and more about less and less” and the Barack Obama administration appointing too few political scientists to high-profile government positions.

Whatever the current state of affairs in Washington, Nye's is not an accurate characterization of the historical relationship between academia, academic knowledge, and the United Nations. While the relationship could and should be made closer and more institutionalized in a way that will not compromise scholarly independence, for better or worse many academics have had an important influence in fostering ideas that have come to be associated with the world organization. These ideas, especially in the human rights and development arenas, and the people who wield them have made a difference as the research and oral histories from the United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP) demonstrate. Indiana University Press has just published the capstone volume of this project, *UN Ideas That Changed the World*.

This research has breathed new life into one of the UN's overlooked characteristics: the quality and diversity of its intellectual leadership, and its values-based framework for dealing with the global challenges of our times. The decade-long effort that I have had the pleasure of directing with Richard Jolly and Louis Emmerij (the co-authors with me of the book) has explored what is omitted or underemphasized in textbooks about the world organization or other units of the UN system—namely, the ideas, norms, and principles that permeate the world organization's atmosphere. This reality flies in the face of UN bashing, a favorite sport in the Washington Beltway and elsewhere.

For those who do not see the relevance of connecting scholars and practitioners, UNIHP clearly shows the relevance of academics working as staff members, consultants, or experts inside and outside the world organization. They are a key part of what earlier this year in *Global Governance* we dubbed the “Third UN” —a group of non-state actors closely engaged with the UN but distinct from member states (the first UN) or members of the Secretariat (the second UN). The roles of scholars in the third UN include research, policy analysis, and idea mongering. Together with other Third UN players such as NGOs, they help put forward new information and ideas, push for new policies, and mobilize public opinion around UN deliberations and operations.

In fact, many individuals who have played an essential role in the world organization's intellectual and norm-building activities were neither government officials nor international civil servants but academics. Moreover, many key contributors to ideas as members of the first and the second UN frequently had significant prior associations with a university, a policy think-tank, or an NGO—or joined one after leaving government or UN service. Moreover, intellectual energies among the three UNs blend, and there is often a powerful synergy. A revolving door

turns as academics and national political actors move inside to take staff positions in UN secretariats, or UN staff members leave to join NGOs, universities, or national office and subsequently engage from outside, but are informed by experience inside.

During Kofi Annan's tenure, visible U.S. political scientists (John Ruggie and Michael Doyle, both of whom have played important roles in ACUNS) worked as assistant secretaries-general to give advice on various new initiatives and specialized concerns (such as terrorism, relations with the private sector, UN reforms, and overall strategic planning and coordination). Yet it is generally believed that contemporary political science does not often advance the careers of those who engage in "policy" work or "policy-relevant" research.

We should realize that the importance of scholarly engagement with the UN and vice versa has traditionally not gone unrecognized. So far nine persons with substantial experience within the UN and its policy formulation processes have won the Nobel Prize in economic sciences—Jan Tinbergen, Wassily Leontief, Gunnar Myrdal, James Meade, W. Arthur Lewis, Theodore W. Schultz, Lawrence R. Klein, Richard Stone, Amartya Sen—and Joseph Stiglitz is a possible tenth, a former World Bank official who resigned and is now closely associated with the UN. This is not to mention individual Nobel Peace Prize winners who worked for years as staff members of the United Nations, including the distinguished political scientist Ralph Bunche, the first African-American PhD in government from Harvard.

Much of contemporary international relations literature privileges developing mathematical models, new methodologies, or the most parsimonious theories expressed in jargon that is less and less intelligible to policymakers; yet the bulk of scholarship about the United Nations and the main substantive issues on the world organization's agenda have long emanated from universities, specialist research institutes, and learned societies mainly in North America and Western Europe. During World War II, the notion that the UN would be a major instrument of Washington's foreign policy attracted support from U.S. foundations. For example, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace actively followed and promoted research on the new organization by scholars and by officials from the League of Nations.

External policy research organizations with intimate links to UN affairs include the Stanley Foundation, the International Peace Institute, the Social Science Research Council, and the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue. Two professional associations, the Society for International Development (founded in 1967) and of course ACUNS, emerged as part of policy research networks focused on the UN and the international system. While UN think tanks such as the UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) and UN University (UNU) are subject to financial pressure from governments, their semi-autonomy often provides a backdoor channel for external academic and analytical expertise.

Thus, the United Nations has developed both formal and informal institutional channels to get inputs from academics. And it is not infrequently that scholars in the Third UN launch or

doggedly pursue notions about which important players in the first or the second UN are less than enthusiastic about necessary change. Three examples help illustrate this point.

The first is Francis Deng, a distinguished anthropologist and lawyer and diplomat, whose mandate (1992-2004) as the representative of the secretary-general was intertwined with the Project on Internal Displacement directed by him and Roberta Cohen at the Brookings Institution. Deng and Cohen deftly reframed “sovereignty as responsibility” in the late 1980s and early 1990s to help foster international assistance and protection for internally displaced persons. Their reframing of state sovereignty not as a privilege but as responsibility helped pave the way for the 2001 report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect*. Deng’s success was because he had a foot in two camps—taking advantage of being within the intergovernmental system of the United Nations and outside it.

In another variation, members of the Second UN may sometimes turn to the Third UN to formulate ideas that are controversial but propitious to place on the agenda and pursue when they come from non-state actors. One of the clearest examples is the idea of “human development,” which UNDP administrator William Draper imported through the work of Cambridge-trained economists and roommates Mabbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen. The concept has seen continual refinements since the publication of the first Human Development Report in 1990. Certainly, some UNDP staff members were keen on the notion, but the technical details were always supported by a team of independent international scholars (including Paul Streeten and Richard Jolly), both inside and outside the Secretariat.

The Human Development Report is a prime example of intellectual bite. As an outsider becoming a temporary UN insider, ul Haq and others associated with the effort took political flack from irritated governments. Many of them resent that poorer neighbors get higher ratings because they make more sensible decisions about priorities, for example devoting limited resources to education and health instead of weapons. Indeed, many governments disputed the appropriateness of UNDP’s using official contributions to commission finger-pointing research. But complaints were resisted by the UNDP. This appears to contradict the perspectives of scholars such as Susan Strange and Robert Cox (who spent twenty-five years in the International Labor Organization before returning to academia and was an early chair of ACUNS), which posit that views from inside any intergovernmental secretariat can only be orthodox and sustain the status quo.

A third example is the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)—established by UN Environment Programme and the World meteorological Organization in 1988 to bring to bear the knowledge of card-carrying academics (natural scientists no less) on the dispute over human contribution to climate change. Over twenty years a solid scientific consensus (90 percent of the several thousand scientists involved) emerged: not only is the evidence for global warming unequivocal, but the human influence behind this change is now beyond doubt, largely the result of increases in carbon emissions. The 2007 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded jointly to the IPCC

for advancing the frontiers of scientific knowledge about the climate and to former U.S. vice president Al Gore for his advocacy role in raising American and international awareness.

In short, the role of outside-insider or inside-outsider offers advantages that should be replicated for other controversial issues when independent research is required, institutional protective barriers are high, normative gaps exist, and political hostility is widespread. Professor Lawrence Klein, an eloquent member of the Third UN on disarmament and development, has observed, “I believe that it would be quite valuable if the UN had a better academic world contact.” Indeed, the import of new thinking, approaches, and policies from scholars remains vital to the world organization. To this end, there is an essential role to be played by ACUNS and others devoted to helping break new common ground between scholars and practitioners.