

# Practical Reflexivity and Political Science: Strategies for Relating Scholarship and Political Practice

Trine Villumsen Berling, *Centre for Advanced Security Theory (CAST), University of Copenhagen*

Christian Bueger, *Cardiff University*

**ABSTRACT** The simplistic, but still influential, idea of a clear-cut boundary between science and politics does not capture the complexities of the ongoing “dialogue between science and politics.” Neither do political scientists live in an ivory tower, nor do they breathe the air of a separate world. However, the relation between political science practitioners and the rest of the world remains knotty. In this contribution we outline the value of a focus on “practical reflexivity” to assist in the dialogue with political practice. Based on proposals from social theory we evaluate six strategies of coping with the dilemmas of engaging with practice. The strategies provide a menu of choice for political scientists, as well as systematization of furthering the discussion on practical reflexivity.

The simplistic, but still influential, idea of a clear-cut boundary between science and politics does not capture the complexities of the ongoing “dialogue” between science and politics. Perhaps it never did. “Critical” research within the social sciences has made this painstakingly clear. Neither do political scientists live in an ivory tower, nor do they breathe the air of a separate world. Yet, the relation between political science and the rest of the world remains knotty. Arguments about reflexivity abound and a range of dilemmas has surfaced as a consequence, making it intricate for the scholar to engage with practice. This article suggests systematization and strategies for tackling these dilemmas through a focus on *practical reflexivity*: The reflexivity about the social and practical positioning or “situatedness” of researchers in their concrete interactions with political practice in which they juggle pertinent dilemmas. Social theory flourishes with insight that can help us build coping strategies for engaging with practice. This article starts a reflection on how to do that.

---

Trine Villumsen Berling is a postdoctoral researcher at CAST. Her research interests include security studies, think tanks and expert knowledge, the theory/practice relationship, and the sociology of knowledge. She can be contacted at [tvb@cast.ku.dk](mailto:tvb@cast.ku.dk)

Christian Bueger is lecturer in international relations at Cardiff University. His research interests include international organizations, maritime security, practice theory, and the sociology of science and expertise. Further information is available at <http://bueger.info>. He can be contacted at [cbueger@gmx.de](mailto:cbueger@gmx.de).

Our argument unfolds in the following steps. Next we discuss why the relation between political science and political practice is conceived as inherently problematic. We briefly discuss the relation of theory and practice and point to major dilemmas that political scientists face. We argue that dilemmas have already been described fairly extensively in the literature, the discussion of how to cope with them, however, is less developed. Then the following section discusses ideas from social theory to introduce a range of coping strategies. We then discuss six different strategies for political scientists and how they address the dilemmas. We conclude with a reflection on how practical reflexivity can move forward.

### THE DILEMMAS OF ENGAGING WITH POLITICAL PRACTICE

Asked about the role of political science for political practice, a conventional (and indeed convenient) answer lies in pointing to the irrelevance of social scientific arguments, ideas, and theories. This answer is usually supported by pointing to the divergences between the worlds of science and the worlds of politics and suggesting the existence of a “gap” that is not easily bridged. Calls for making social science more relevant and suggestions for bridging the diagnosed gap flourish within political science and other disciplines.<sup>1</sup> But such a position is too convenient. It lifts social science above the messiness of politics, conceals the de facto everyday involvement of science in political affairs—reaching from merely the value choices theory entails to more straight-forward political advocacy by academics—and it veils

science in the myth of detachment and independence. In other words, embracing a narrative of irrelevance and gaps justifies ignorance toward questions of the political character of research or researchers' social responsibility.

To be fair, political science hosts a project of research that has frequently and persistently pointed to the insufficient character of the "gap escape." For instance in international relations, a line of thinking reaching from classics Hans Morgenthau and Hedley Bull, to contemporaries Friedrich Kratochwil, Richard Ashley, or RBJ Walker, recurrently stresses that science is neither detached nor free from value choices. For them, what guarantees the quality of political science is exactly a reflection on the relation between political science and politics. Yet, while such a line of reasoning is warmly embraced by researchers who describe themselves as "critical," it has often boiled down to an epistemological critique of positivist ideals that are often preached but rarely practiced. In other words, scholars have been busy criticizing "the others," those they conceive of as the mainstream, the preachers of positivism. Rarely has this critique been taken forward into a practice of (self-)reflexivity toward a researcher's own position.

Contrary to this, to embrace the notion of practical reflexivity stresses the idea that the strength of social science relies on being transparent about one's own position in social and political contexts. It is to reflect on the relation of one's own practices to others. This includes reflexivity on epistemological, ontological, and methodological questions and extends also to talking about other

researchers to choose their own methods and research questions even if these are not embraced by practice. However, autonomy can lead to detachment and to a secluded life of irrelevance. The ivory tower is the often-mentioned picture of autonomous research with no relevance for the world of practice. It gives the researcher a certain *status*—at least within the scientific field—but it risks sidetracking research in practice. So how does one stay autonomous, while increasing relevance?

Third, knowledge travels, but it does not travel as a coherent package insensitive to local contexts. Contextual translation and interpretation is an integral part of any voyage of knowledge, but it carries the possibility or risk of misinterpretation or abuse. This dynamic raises the question of the reach of the researcher's responsibility. If scholars cannot steer the use of their knowledge and consequences cannot be anticipated, how can they take responsibility for that knowledge? To take it to the extreme, should one also be responsible for "that majority of the readings and usages that are misunderstandings?" (Wæver 1999, 336). How do we balance the tight rope between producing knowledge and not being able to steer it? Keep silent? Or steel our choices with practical reflexivity and hope for the best?

These three problems are core issues in the relation of academics to society and policymaking. The problems are dilemmas in that they present researchers with the choice of two (or more) alternatives (or "horns"), neither of which are favorable. Truth cannot be rejected and embraced at the same time, one cannot be

*If scholars cannot steer the use of their knowledge and consequences cannot be anticipated, how can they take responsibility for that knowledge? To take it to the extreme, should one also be responsible for "that majority of the readings and usages that are misunderstandings?" (Wæver 1999, 336).*

scholarly practices, such as writing and presentation practices, giving interviews to the media, or speaking to state officials (Bueger and Gadinger 2007). Extending reflexivity in this sense reveals a range of practical dilemmas academics face in their everyday engagement with political practice. These dilemmas escape easy or ready-made solutions, but they can be addressed by performing practical reflexivity. Three core dilemmas, at least, can be extracted from the everyday life of the critical academic.

First, is the "truth dilemma." Arguably, since the advents of modernity scientific authority has rested on a notion of the truth. The prevailing convention is that science does not occupy partisan interests or advocates distinct policies. Instead, science speaks truth to power and delivers scientific certainty on which grounds policy can be based. Scientists are considered the representatives of the factual. Yet, critical attacks on the positivist methodology cast doubt on the possibility to speak in the name of truth and to deliver universal certainties. Yet, who wants to listen if truth is not claimed for scientific results? Will practitioners not always demand that scientists speak from a position of truth, certainty, and universalism? So how to question truth, while preserving a "place from where to speak"?

Second, autonomy is often seen as a prerequisite for systematically producing knowledge that is not "tainted" by various forms of interests (political, economic, status). Autonomy allows

relevant and maintain full autonomy, any utterance has consequences, and silence is no option. There are no easy solutions. But still we have to cope.

While much will hang on individuals probing and experimenting in distinct situations and contexts, we suggest here to structure reflexive practice around a set of "ideal types" or strategies. These produce a set of guidelines for researchers. Guidelines will not be translatable directly into practice, and even if institutionalized in some way would not directly condition action. With this set-up, however, we hope to provide a structure to the future discussion of practical reflexivity.

#### SOCIAL THEORY, PRACTICAL REFLEXIVITY, AND COPING STRATEGIES

In this section, we introduce six strategies for performing practical reflexivity to cope with the described dilemmas. The six outlines—Pielke's "honest broker," Gramsci's "organic intellectual," Bourdieu's "collective intellectual," Enloe's "curious expert," Haraway's "situated expert," and Rorty's "liberal ironist" have been introduced to the "critical" political science discourse, but have not been juxtaposed in the interest of spurring a debate on the directions practical reflexivity may take. Although our discussion of strategies is certainly not exhaustive, it clarifies a variety of productive answers to cope with dilemmas.

---

## The Honest Broker

Policy studies and the sociology of science have a long-standing interest in how science contributes to policy processes. From this debate, Roger Pielke develops the notion of the scientist as an “honest broker.” Pielke sees this strategy as a way of fertilizing the connections of science with policymaking rather than trying to keep them separate. “[P]erhaps somewhat ironically, the best way to diminish the role of politics in scientific institutions is not to pretend that science and politics can be kept separate” (Pielke 2007, 149). Pielke sees the need for honest brokers as notably arising in contexts with a degree of high uncertainty and a conflict of values at stake. In such situations, scientists have often acted as stealth “issue advocates.” Contrary to these, Pielke sees the core function of honest brokers in widening the availability of policy choices, instead of closing debate by scientifically justifying only one option. The honest broker aims at dismissing that only one option is scientifically supported and places “scientific understandings in the context of a smorgasbord of policy options” (Pielke 2007, 17).

Thus, honest brokering is an explicit strategy to cope with the three dilemmas. It replaces the importance of truth with the task of clarifying options; it sees transparent and “honest” engagement with policy practice as a path to restoring autonomy; and by seeing scientists’ roles as opening rather than closing off policy discourse, it softens the steerability problem.

## The Organic Intellectual

In a more classical version of the role of the intellectual, Antonio Gramsci holds that “all men are intellectuals [...] but not all men have in society the *function* of intellectuals” (Gramsci 1971a, 140;

The organic intellectual’s strategy makes steering knowledge easier: when teaching and acting go hand in hand, the gap between knowledge production and practice is closed. Also autonomy is only a value when directed at the dominant truth regime. The bottom-up truth as seen from the “have-nots” should be embodied, not regarded from a distance.

## The Collective Intellectual

To Pierre Bourdieu, expert status is produced in a scientific field, set apart from political practice (Berling 2012; Bourdieu 2004). Intellectuals find themselves in positions where acceptance in the scientific field is a prerequisite for gaining “a place from where to speak” in the overall power structure of a society. This hinges on doing research in a *certain way* that is accepted by the scientific community. Bourdieu chose “clinical sociology” that focuses on laying bare and challenging “doxic practice,” that is, common understandings, through empirical research, and by performing critical analysis also on the sciences.

The potential for academically driven change is limited, however, because “intellectuals [...] occupy a dominated position in the field of power” (Bourdieu 1993, 125). Intellectuals often reproduce the *doxic* understandings of power relations and therefore risk “consecrating” the existing power structure. Bourdieu’s proposed solution is the creation of collectives of intellectuals who agree on methodology and a desire to challenge social laws. Critical analysis can remain agnostic to what is “really real” (Pouliot 2007, 363)—or true in an objectivist sense—as long as the methodology is rigorous and the research is cumulative. A collective not only meets the (truth) standards expected by practitioners, but also fortifies the position of autonomy for the researchers. No

*Thus, the method of the curious expert is to always consider a long attention span historically and a readiness to be surprised, to admit to the surprise, and not squeeze it into a “comfortable, worn conceptual shoe.” The “old shoe” may marginalize a silenced group of people (Enloe 2004, 13–22).*

italics added). The intellectual function comes in two versions: the traditional and the organic intellectual. Traditional intellectuals consider themselves as “freefloating thinkers” (Wyn Jones 1995, 305), but are in fact “the dominant group’s ‘deputies’ exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government” (Gramsci 1971a, 145). The organic intellectual, in contrast, is situated within a certain structure and can help overthrow it from within by turning attention to the relations of domination in a society (the Marxist roots are pretty clear). Thus, the organic intellectual carries emancipatory potential and has an obligation to act. The path to emancipation lies in education and the construction of an “alternative intellectual-moral block” (Gramsci 1971b, 641). This situation risks turning the intellectual into a politician. But following neo-Gramscians in political science (e.g., Booth 1994; Lawson 2008; Wyn Jones 1995) a path may lie in constantly turning the structures of *academic* domination on their heads: by inviting scholars working in academically dominated places to speak; by writing on subjects which are silenced; by constantly speaking for the underprivileged (whatever that may mean in a given time or space).

guarantee against distortions or misrepresentations exists, however, when the knowledge leaves the scientific community, and exclusion of alternative research questions and methods (and perhaps truths) remains a real risk.

## The Curious Expert

From a more practical perspective Enloe has “become more and more curious about curiosity and its absence” (Enloe 2004, 2). With this starting point she calls for a renewed (feminist) approach to politics and aims at expanding the research agenda by emphasizing process and curiosity. For instance, she transforms the term “cheap labor” into “labor made cheap” and spurs the question: by whom? The answer to this question breeds curiosity about who benefits from not asking that question. Whose political purpose does it serve to stay uncurious about the answer? The center and the margin come into view; the silenced may be given a voice (Enloe 2004, 20).

For Enloe, words like “tradition,” “always,” “oldest” should make us alert: these words are tailor-made to close off questions about the historicity and temporality of a state of affairs and

domination. Thus, the method of the curious expert is to always consider a long attention span historically and a readiness to be surprised, to admit to the surprise, and not squeeze it into a “comfortable, worn conceptual shoe.” The “old shoe” may marginalize a silenced group of people (Enloe 2004, 13–22).

The aim of the curious expert is not explaining, but taking a “quizzical” stance. The method emphasizes ideas such as not just addressing the official part of a meeting, but arriving before the meeting and listening to the “off-hand banter” and joining when the meeting “continues among a select few down the corridor and into the pub” (Enloe 2004, 5). In these settings, the “usual,” the “always,” the “oldest” will be laid bare to the analyst, and quizzical questions may be posed in direct engagement between analyst and practitioner.

The curious expert has to get close to practice to apply the method. In this relation, autonomy can be kept by insisting on demanding an answer to habitual ways of doing things. The truth dilemma is circumvented by taking a quizzical stance and by acting almost like a consultant in on-going processes. The knowledge may not be popular, and cannot be steered, but in this dialogical form there is hope that old marginalizations will be realised and—perhaps—acted on.

### The Situated Expert

From a more heavily epistemological viewpoint, Haraway (e.g., Haraway 1992) insists on situating knowledge production—and most importantly objectivist science—in semiotic-material contexts: No knowledge is produced from a Kantian “nowhere.” Haraway stresses the metaphor of vision and argues for si(gh)ting

*A common goal of challenging comfortable truths is met through different conceptions of interests, methods, and contingency. Some are more distant to ideas of critique, whereas others see it as a prerequisite for being heard. Some see the fight for certain interests as the main project of academia, whereas others see the challenge in itself as the goal.*

knowledge—a term that stresses both a temporal and a spatial situatedness. No truth is constant; no truth is produced without a semiotic-material presence. This does not mean that knowledge is located concretely in a territory or in a person. It means that every perspective excludes a different perspective, that every point of view excludes another point of view, and that working toward something means turning your back on something else. Being aware of a multitude of narratives and presenting them as alternatives to status quo is objectivity to Haraway—and her way of dealing with the truth dilemma.

To the situated expert, autonomy relies on revealing that objectivist science is a power practice that should be avoided or at least countered through deconstruction of central dichotomies (nature/culture, subject/object, nature/society) and categories (sex, race, class). To this end, Haraway has carried out deconstruction on a multitude of “objects.” Cracks in commercials, science fiction literature, art, dog training, technology, the hard sciences, and her own practices are opened up and a “diffraction” is created in the solid dichotomies that make the objects meaningful. Irony is a central part of the process of creating diffraction and laying bare situatedness. Steering knowledge is not necessary, because the

partial perspective of any knowledge should always be contested and supplemented with another.

### The Liberal Ironist

Also picking up on irony—but from a pragmatist standpoint—Rorty defines the liberal ironist as *liberal* in the sense that cruelty is thought to be the worst thing we do, that suffering should be countered, and that solidarity is something to hope for; and as *ironist* because the researcher faces the contingency of his own central beliefs: Everything is historicised, turned on its head, and countered—including someone’s own firmest ideas (Rorty 1989).

Science is understood as an activity that aims at controlling experience and to translate troubled, disturbed, and ambiguous situations into determinate ones: Science provides means to control experience and to provide expanded problem-solving procedures. Hence science is crucial for good policies as it assists in identifying problems and in coping with these. The ironist has no preferred method and no firm grip on interests. A constant questioning of self and other, and a radical take on the equality of scientific and other types of method remove the possibility of creating any privileged role for science. Yet, science is an activity that produces hope, imagines alternative futures, and may assist in redescribing problems.

Drawing on a classical pragmatist position, Rorty suggests that the primary tool for science is language: stressing the contingency of any narrative or vocabulary and developing alternatives is a pivotal task. Practically, the liberal ironist nourishes understandings of the “other” as “one of us,” and sees the “strange sufferer” as a “fellow sufferer” (Rorty 1989, xvi). By telling stories of

them *and* us, the contingency of divisions are brought to the fore. Dissemination of science can fruitfully take place through the arts. Ideas are effective not as bare ideas, but because they have imaginative content and emotional appeal. Through ethnography, journalist reports, comic books, docudrama, and especially novels, stories of the other can be advanced (Rorty 1989).

In sum, the ironists address the truth dilemma in attempting to demonstrate the contingency of any truth claim (including their own), they reject that autonomy is a relevant precondition for science (exactly the opposite is argued!), and if ironists are successful in guaranteeing that any knowledge is recognized as contingent, then indeed the non-steerability problem also loses its drama.

### WHITHER PRACTICAL REFLEXIVITY? STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH PRACTICE

These six outlines clarify that coping strategies for the dilemmas can be identified. A common goal of challenging comfortable truths is met through different conceptions of interests, methods, and contingency. Some are more distant to ideas of critique, whereas others see it as a prerequisite for being heard. Some see the fight



for certain interests as the main project of academia, whereas others see the challenge in itself as the goal. Some stress contingency, irony, and narrative structure while others stress empirical detail or proximity to practitioners. Together they give us a sense of the joys and pitfalls of engaging with society as intellectuals and experts. And, importantly, they add a dimension of practical reflexivity to the debate about intellectualism and expertise today. Where is the expert situated in the social structure? How is expert authority produced? The answers to these questions carry important insight for the individual researcher when contemplating speaking on the behalf of others, choosing a particular research method, or a particular (public) outlet to publish results. Will your next publication be a piece of art?

The “ideal types” or strategies we discussed do not dictate solutions, but they exemplify dimensions of reflexivity and practices that can be taken as inspiration to experiment with different ways of reacting to the dilemmas. Thinking about the dilemmas, experimenting with new forms of elite and public engagements presents a way to further and indeed routinize practical reflexivity in political science. After all, “[t]he bottom line is that scientists have choices about how they engage the broader society of which they are part. Hiding behind science is simply not a productive option” (Pielke 2007, 152).

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For comments and suggestions on a previous version of the article we like to thank Elisabeth Prügl and Patrick Jackson as well as the anonymous reviewers of *PS*. ■

#### NOTE

1. See, for instance, George (1994), Eriksson and Sundelius (2005), Walt (2005), or Anderson (2003), for a critique see Bueger and Gadinger (2007), and Bueger and Villumsen (2007).

#### REFERENCES

Anderson, Lisa. 2003. *Pursuing Truth, Exercising Power: Social Science and Public Policy in the 21st Century*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Berling, Trine Villumsen. 2012. “Knowledges.” In *Bourdieu in International Relations: Rethinking Key Concepts in IR*, ed. R. Adler-Nissen, 59–77. London: Routledge.
- Booth, K. 1994. “Security and Self. Reflections of a Fallen Realist.” *YCISS Occasional Paper* 26.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1993. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. R. Johnson. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2004. *Science of Science and Reflexivity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bueger, Christian, and Frank Gadinger. 2007. “Reassembling and Dissecting: International Relations Practice from a Science Studies Perspective.” *International Studies Perspectives* 8 (1): 90–110.
- Bueger, Christian, and Trine Villumsen. 2007. “Beyond the Gap: Relevance, Fields of Practice and the Securitizing Consequences of (Democratic Peace) Research.” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 10 (4): 417–48.
- Enloe, Cynthia. 2004. *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Eriksson, Johan, and Bengt Sundelius. 2005. “Molding Minds that Form Policy: How to Make Research Useful.” *International Studies Perspectives* 6: 51–72.
- George, Alexander L. 1994. “Some Guides to Bridging the Gap.” *Mershon International Studies Review* 38 (1): 171–72.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1971a. “The Intellectuals.” In *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith, 131–61. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1971b. “The Study of Philosophy.” In *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith, 624–707. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Haraway, Donna. 1992. “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriated Others.” In *Cultural Studies*, ed. L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, and P. Treichler, 295–337. London: Routledge.
- Lawson, G. 2008. “For a Public International Relations.” *International Political Sociology* 2 (1): 17–37.
- Pielke, Roger A., Jr. 2007. *The Honest Broker. Making Sense of Science in Policy and Politics*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Pouliot, Vincent. 2007. “‘Subjectivism’: Toward a Constructivist Methodology.” *International Studies Quarterly* 51 (2): 359–84.
- Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wæver, O. 1999. “Securitizing Sectors? Reply to Eriksson.” *Cooperation and Conflict* 34 (3): 334–40.
- Walt, Stephen M. 2005. “The Relationship between Theory and Policy in International Relations.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 8: 23–48.
- Wyn Jones, R. 1995. “‘Message in a Bottle’? Theory and Praxis in Critical Security Studies.” *Contemporary Security Policy* 16 (3): 299–319.