"What Are Intellectuals Good For?"

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Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security. By Michael C. Desch. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. 368p. $35.00 cloth.

The Ideas Industry: How Pessimists, Partisans, and Plutocrats are Transforming the Marketplace of Ideas. By Daniel W. Drezner. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019 (paperback edition). 360p. $19.95 paper.

Political scientists who specialize in international relations (IR) are undergoing a crisis. The more that global politics shapes modern life, the less their discipline resonates with nonspecialists. Decision makers, for example, rank other disciplines—history, area studies, international affairs, public policy, and economics—as more useful.[1] Ordinary Americans, for their part, agree: as a recent report issued by the American Political Science Association averred, "The wider public does not seem to view political science as a useful resource for a better understanding of politics or as an aid to solving public problems."[2] This situation, encouraged and bolstered by scholars' embrace of increasingly impenetrable quantitative methodologies, has raised crucial questions about the very purpose of the discipline.

In recent books, Michael C. Desch and Daniel W. Drezner attempt to reinvigorate IR by proffering potential paths the discipline could take to reaffirm—or, as the case may be, just affirm—its importance to elites and ordinary people. Desch desires for IR scholars to attenuate their scientistic attachments to mathematics and formal models and reembrace area knowledge, whereas Drezner wants them to accommodate to the novel realities of an "ideas industry" that privileges Panglossian "thought leaders" over critical "public intellectuals." Both Desch and Drezner offer prudent suggestions that, if heeded, will likely enable IR scholarship to have a more significant impact on policy and speak to broader swaths of US society. Unfortunately, however, the two authors too easily accept the status quo. By focusing primarily on the issue of how to exert influence, they ignore a more important question: influence for what? In an era defined by heated debates over the future of US grand strategy—discussions that inevitably address complex questions of empire, race, patriarchy, climate, and capitalism—it is disappointing that neither Desch nor Drezner tackles any of these topics directly.

Desch's *Cult of the Irrelevant* argues that the professionalization of political science—the most important effect of which was the discipline's embrace of mathematics and universal models—has led IR scholars to value formal rigor over policy relevance. In so doing, IR specialists have disconnected themselves from national security decision makers, who "for the most part [claim] academic social science is not giving them what they want" (p. 2). According to Desch, officials need political science because it "limns the range of possibilities open to policymakers" (p. 5), who otherwise "do not have the time to develop well-thought out views of the causes, consequences, or responses to various threats" (p. 189). By providing "a mental map to help [decision makers] navigate the real world" (p. 5), Desch avows, IR scholars can make US foreign policy better.

Desch's argument is steeped in the history of political science. He maintains that since the early twentieth century, the discipline has attempted to accommodate "two contradictory impulses: to be a rigorous science and a more broadly relevant social enterprise" (p. 10). For most of modern history, the search for institutional prestige and resources, as well as normal scientific developments, impelled IR scholars to embrace the former goal at the expense of the latter. Indeed, Desch asserts that it was only during wartime that the external security environment encouraged scholars to work for the government and dedicate themselves to pressing real-world problems. He laments this history and insists that, going forward, "policy engagement ought to be viewed not so much as an avocation for social scientists but as a core component of the scholarly enterprise" (p. 17).

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To explicate the possibilities and pitfalls of social scientific–government collaboration, Desch takes his readers on a tour of twentieth-century war. As he admits, the record of such collaboration is decidedly mixed. In some instances, social scientists helped make policy better; during World War II, for example, the area studies approach, which is "based on deep knowledge of [foreign nations'] language and culture" (p. 61), contributed to more sensitive and supple decision making. Nonetheless, after the war, the "behavioral revolution" undermined area studies and made academic social science less useful to policy makers, who sought specific policy recommendations and had little use for overly complicated, ahistorical, and mathematized models. As such, policy makers began to look outside the university for advice, relying especially on new national security research institutions like the RAND Corporation to provide the knowledge they needed to make decisions.

Desch, in fact, argues that the postwar obsession with scientism led the academic contributions to policy making that did continue in the 1950s and 1960s to be "suboptimal" and, at times, "even catastrophic" (p. 141). In particular, he highlights the negative impact of Thomas C. Schelling, the Nobel Prize-winning economist who helped establish the field of nuclear strategy, and Walt Whitman Rostow, the economic historian *cum* policy maker whose *The Stages of Economic Growth* (1960) became an influential text of modernization theory. Neither Schelling nor Rostow was an expert on any particular world region; rather, they were generalists who believed that their sophisticated methods and models enabled them to understand, explicate, and predict a variety of decisional and historical processes. Desch, however, argues that the record reveals that "when such approaches on occasion influence policy, their effects can be pernicious" (p. 147). For instance, Schelling's ideas about coercion informed the failed US bombing effort in the Vietnam War, whereas Rostow's theory of development "provided the theoretical rationale" (p. 194) for futile counterinsurgency programs in that war.

If Schelling and Rostow both contributed to the US disaster in Vietnam, why does Desch insist that social scientists have a constructive role to play in policy making? To square this circle, he declares that "[t]he problem during Vietnam was not too much, but rather too little, scholarly engagement with policy" (p. 197). Namely, "the decline of area studies among increasingly behaviorally oriented social science disciplines" (p. 199) meant that "the U.S. government had [access to] shockingly little independent [i.e., academic] area expertise relevant to Vietnam" (p. 197), which prevented officials from appreciating the difficulties they would face fighting, let alone winning, the war. In essence, Desch maintains "that had area specialists had greater input into policymaking, the United States might have averted many mistakes in Vietnam" (p. 197) and perhaps might not have escalated the conflict in the first place.

Desch concludes his book by suggesting that political scientists who desire to shape policy do two things: adopt "a problem-, rather than method-driven, approach to scholarship" (p. 239) and become more open to qualitative analysis steeped in historical, cultural, and linguistic knowledge. For too long, he proclaims, professional disciplinary incentives have encouraged academics to embrace scientism and remove themselves from policy debates, which has contributed to bad policy and the "bankruptcy" (p. 341) of the public sphere. In his opinion, "the country's intellectual recapitalization" depends on universities "reclaim[ing] their place as one of society's main sources of independent ideas about the problems that it faces" (p. 242). As this suggests, Desch is ambivalent about scholars becoming policy makers themselves; for him, the intellectual's most important functions are, first, to offer decision makers concrete recommendations based on extensive research and, second, to provide the public sphere with ideas that improve democratic debate.

Cult of the Irrelevant is the best survey of IR scholars' contributions to US foreign policy currently available; it also contains manifold recommendations that present and future political scientists would be wise to consider. And though Desch does not deploy the language of the philosophy of science, throughout the book he implicitly raises crucial ontological and epistemological questions that go to the heart of the academic study of IR. Unsurprisingly, as a historian—that is to say, as someone who maintains that historical events are contingent and irreplicable, and hence unmodelable—I am sympathetic to Desch's criticisms of mathematics, quantification, and formal methodologies. For example, I am skeptical that ahistorical approaches like rational choice theory can teach us much about how policy choices are made in real time. This is not to suggest—and Desch himself does not suggest—that formal methods are useless or unimportant; they can clearly illuminate patterns and tendencies across time and space. Nevertheless, it does seem that purely quantitative studies necessarily elide the contingencies that provide the texture of real-world IR, which inevitably makes them of little practical utility to decision makers.

Desch and I disagree, however, about the policy role of the intellectual. For Desch, the intellectual is decidedly not a critic. In *Cult of the Irrelevant*'s conclusion, he states in no uncertain terms that IR scholars should "focus less on criticism of policies than on offering a positive policy agenda that provides a better solution [to a policy problem] within the general political and bureaucratic parameters in Washington and our political system" (p. 252). The intellectual, in other words, should be a technocrat who accommodates herself to the world as it actually exists. To me, this is a needlessly impoverished understanding of

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how intellectuals can aid policy formation. Advice and criticism are not mutually exclusive; in many instances, in fact, the most constructive suggestions emerge when one interrogates basic structures of power. To focus on the question of, say, how to ensure that the US alliance with Saudi Arabia functions smoothly without examining why we have this alliance in the first place is to abandon the heterodox thinking that intellectuals, with their hyperspecialized knowledge of a region or subject, are ideally able to contribute to policy discussions. If we intellectuals give up on critique, who will replace us? I fear the answer is no one. In an era where the election of a xenophobic demagogue has shattered the shibboleths that have defined US foreign policy for decades, Americans, who are clearly tired of US imperialism, require more, not less, critique of the world as it is.[3]

At the same time, Desch is correct to suggest that intellectuals must not confine themselves to criticism. This was the mistake made by earlier generations of intellectuals who were skeptical of US power: they lambasted US foreign policy without providing pragmatic and actionable alternatives. Put another way, intellectuals who desire change must temper their critiques with policy recommendations that seek to create the world in which they want to live. As this implies, critical intellectuals should collaborate with sympathetic decision makers when the opportunity presents itself. They must do so, however, without compromising their fundamentally critical stance. Although this is easier said than done, it must be accomplished if intellectuals are to exert a salutary impact on domestic and international society.

Cult of the Irrelevant is also marred by Desch's unwillingness to wrestle with the reason why connections between social scientists and policy makers were institutionalized after World War II in organizations like MIT's Center for International Studies and the RAND Corporation: to construct and manage the American empire. In short, scholars were recruited into state and parastate institutions to provide the theoretical and area knowledge necessary to ensure US military, economic, and cultural primacy.[4] And indeed, this is the goal to which intellectuals have contributed throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. To advocate for more efficient and effective social science–government collaboration in the present system is thus to advocate for more efficient and effective American empire. Although I disagree with this strategic ambition, it can be defended; Desch, though, simply assumes that US global supremacy is a legitimate aim of US foreign policy. But recent debates between foreign policy professionals over the historicity and desirability of the so-called liberal international order indicate that the legitimacy of this goal can no longer be taken for granted. As such, any book that calls for intellectuals to participate in government decision making must address—and justify—the basic purpose of such cooperation or risk being ignored.

Unlike *Cult of the Irrelevant*, Drezner's *The Ideas Industry* is primarily interested in the workings of the public sphere, or what the author terms, deploying neoliberal argot, "the modern marketplace of ideas." Drezner begins his book by making a useful distinction between "public intellectuals" and "thought leaders." Where the former "expos[e] shibboleths masquerading as accepted wisdom," the latter "develop their own singular lens to explain the world, and then proselytize that worldview to anyone within earshot" (p. 9). In his opinion, three reinforcing trends have produced an "ideas industry" that punishes public intellectuals and rewards thought leaders. First, "there has been a slow-motion *erosion of trust in prestigious institutions* and professions" (all emphases in original text) engendered by myriad elite failures, from the Iraq War to the Great Recession, which "has made it much harder for traditional public intellectuals to argue from authority" (p. 11). Second, the hyperpolarization of American society has encouraged "the creation of parallel, segmented audiences that will support ideologically pure intellectuals" (p. 11) who are less prone to suppleness of thought. Finally, and most crucial, "*the growth in economic inequality* and the increasing importance of wealthy benefactors" to intellectual life have impelled thinkers to "pus[h] ideas that resonate with plutocrats" (p. 12). Together, these three trends benefit thought leaders "who exude optimism, self-confidence, and appealing [to plutocrats] solutions to hard problems" (p. 69) and put public intellectuals generally critical of US society at a disadvantage.

Drezner is anxious that the decline of public intellectuals will negatively affect American democracy. He rightly notes that when critical intellectuals "lose their prestige, it becomes that much easier for politicians or charlatans to advance an idea into the public consciousness, regardless of its intrinsic merits, through sheer, unflagging will" (p. 9). "For foreign policy ideas in particular," he affirms, "it would be better to have a public sphere that pokes, prods, and generally stress-tests each New New Thing" (p. 14). Yet Drezner is not an unreconstructed critic of the ideas industry; in fact, he believes that "there is a great deal of good that can come from . . . a strong demand . . . for new ideas and vibrant ways of thinking about the world" (pp. 13–14). He therefore advocates for a "symbiosis" in which members of the ideas industry stimulate "more discord and more debate" (p. 14) by incorporating public intellectuals into their fold.

As any casual observer of the ideas industry is aware, political scientists do not have a firm place within it. This troubles Drezner, who asks why other disciplines—namely, economics—have been far more successful in influencing the twenty-first-century marketplace of ideas. His primary explanation is that, unlike political scientists, when economists "engage the public sphere, they do not act like public intellectuals; they act like thought leaders"

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(p. 115). Specifically, Drezner argues that economists' willingness "to preach a 'win-win' doctrine" that asserts that "society as a whole will benefit" when "individuals pursue their self-interest" (p. 115) ensures they will find an eager audience among plutocrats. But political scientists, Drezner claims, have incorrectly attributed economists' public success to their positivist methodology and, partially for this reason, have embraced mathematics and formal models. According to Drezner, however, "the shift in academic political science rhetoric to a more scientific cast" (p. 122) has made it more difficult for IR scholars to communicate with the public. "When political scientists use the neutral language of science to discuss genocide or police brutality," he maintains, "the public views them as talking about terrible things matter-of-factly. More generally, when debates about policy pivot over methodological disputes, the public tunes out completely" (p. 122). As such, Drezner suggests that when addressing their fellow citizens, political scientists should use language that laypeople can easily understand.

To reform the ideas industry, Drezner proposes three solutions. His first suggestion is to relax, because "some of the drivers shaping the modern Ideas Industry may well reverse themselves over the next decade" (p. 241). In particular, "the Trump administration, in embodying governance by thought leader, may well be creating an intellectual backlash" (p. 256). Second, Drezner implores "universities and think tanks . . . to redouble their efforts to bolster their endowments" (p. 241), which will enable them to provide stable homes for critical public intellectuals. Finally, he recommends that thinkers do everything in their power "to internally resist the ways in which the Ideas Industry makes it easy to tune out constructive criticism" (p. 243). As these last two proposals imply, Drezner desires to replace the Pollyannaish culture of the ideas industry with a more combative culture of critique in which public intellectuals are encouraged to challenge the inanities of thought leaders.

The Ideas Industry examines, in vivid and engaging prose, how diverse sectors of US society—academia, think tanks, private consultancies, and the like—develop, disseminate, and promote ideas. Yet, like Desch, Drezner is more interested in teaching people how to navigate a problematic status quo than helping them transform it. On coming to the end of a book that spends much of its time detailing the manifold problems with the ideas industry—it produces "asset bubbles" (p. 197) that popularize questionable ideas like disruptive innovation; it rewards mostly white, mostly male, and mostly rich thinkers—I was struck by the feebleness of Drezner's recommendations for reform. Although he is no doubt right to affirm "that we cannot and should not try to go back to the old days" (p. 240), do intellectuals have to meekly accommodate ourselves to the system as it exists? The recent failures of the marketplace of ideas—most notably, the misinformation and lies that helped engender the election of Donald J. Trump—indicate that the ideas industry requires thoroughgoing transformation.

The most significant lacuna in *The Ideas Industry* is its elision of capitalism. Discussing the inequality that enables plutocrats to have an outsized influence on what ideas dominate the public sphere without discussing capitalism is like discussing rising sea levels without discussing climate change: it focuses on the symptom, not the cause. The distorting effect that ignorant oligarchs have on the public sphere, in fact, underlines substantial problems with the concept of a "free" marketplace of ideas that stands as the normative ideal in *The Ideas Industry*. Simply put, under capitalism there will never be a free marketplace of ideas. As Drezner himself demonstrates, in our contemporary political economy many ideas triumph not because they are "good," but because they are promoted by people with money and power—and this has often been true throughout modern history.[5] To ignore the capitalist system that guarantees that some people have far more resources than others, and are therefore able to disseminate their ideas more widely, misses something fundamental about the ideas industry. Indeed, as long as there are plutocrats, it is unlikely that critical intellectuals will be welcomed en masse into the public sphere.

Drezner also ignores the role that media billionaires played in fostering the hyperpartisanship he laments. To take one prominent example, scholars have demonstrated that watching Fox News—a company founded by right-wing oligarch Rupert Murdoch—makes people more conservative.[6] The only way to prevent this type of manipulation of the public sphere is to address the inequities inevitably engendered by capitalism. Otherwise, billionaires, who unsurprisingly tend to be on the political Right,[7] are going to use their excess wealth to purchase media corporations that gin up support for their preferred policies and ideas.[8]

Together, *Cult of the Irrelevant* and *The Ideas Industry* suggest that the clerisy that makes and debates US foreign policy needs to be augmented with a democratic public empowered to shape US behavior in the world. Since the United States became a truly global power in 1945, foreign policy making has been largely the redoubt of an unelected elite.[9] But as Desch and Drezner highlight, this elite has time and again failed to promote wise foreign policies. After so many decades of disastrous decisions—Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and many more—it seems prudent to search for ways to integrate ordinary people into the policy-making process. Today, many elites justify epistocracy by referencing citizens' "rational ignorance" of foreign affairs. But perhaps Americans would take a more active interest in foreign policy if they believed they could help determine it. Regardless, it is difficult to imagine that the democratic public would be a worse foreign policy maker than the elite that has helmed the US state for the past 30 years.[10]

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The United States, like all postindustrial societies, needs political scientists to take active roles in policy formation and to contribute to public discourse. As the historian Bruce Kuklick noted more than a decade ago, "If we give up on knowledge and thus, to some degree, social science as even a partial guide in human affairs, we leave decisions to habit, authority, or chance. What alternatives do we have to the patient and systematic investigation of phenomena and the exploration of causes and consequences?"[11] Desch and Drezner are therefore right to explore how IR scholars can more effectively assert themselves in Washington, DC, and US society more broadly. Indeed, *Cult of the Irrelevant* and *The Ideas Industry* contain numerous insights on which would-be George Kennans and would-be Fareed Zakarias should meditate. But Desch and Drezner err in their obeisant acceptance of the world as it is. Though it has admittedly become a cliché, intellectuals' greatest duty is to speak truth to power, and the truth is that capitalist imperialism is not working for the majority of people, either at home or abroad.[12] For this reason, we intellectuals must not confine ourselves to discovering how to navigate the system; we must also dedicate ourselves to changing it.

Notes

1 Paul C. Avey and Michael C. Desch, "What Do Policymakers Want from Us? Results of a Survey of Current and Former Senior National Security Decision Makers," *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (June 2014): 231.

2 Arthur Lupia and John H. Aldrich, *Improving Public Perceptions of Political Science's Value* (Washington, DC: American Political Science Association, 2014), 15.

3 See James Carden, "A New Poll Shows the Public Is Overwhelmingly Opposed to Endless US Military Interventions," *The Nation*, January 9, 2018, https://www.thenation.com/article/new-poll-shows-public-overwhelmingly-opposed-to-endless-us-military-interventions/; Joe Cirincione and Guy T. Saperstein, "Progressives Need a New Way to Talk About National Security," *The Nation*, May 11, 2018, https://www.thenation.com/article/progressives-need-a-new-way-to-talk-about-national-security/.

4 See Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Daniel Bessner, *Democracy in Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

5 See, e.g., Vanessa Freije, "The 'Emancipation of Media': Latin American Advocacy for a New International Information Order in the 1970s," *Journal of Global History* 14, no. 2 (July 2019): 301–20.

6 Gregory J. Martin and Ali Yurukoglu, "Bias in Cable News: Persuasion and Polarization," *American Economic Review* 107, no. 9 (September 2017): 2565–99.

7 Benjamin I. Page, Jason Seawright, and Matthew J. Lacombe, *Billionaires and Stealth Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

8 See Kate Vinton, "These 15 Billionaires Own America's News Media Companies," *Forbes*, July 1, 2016, https://www.forbes.com/sites/katevinton/2016/06/01/these-15-billionaires-own-americas-news-media-companies/#260536660ad6; David Gelles, "Billionaires Can Seem Like Saviors to Media Companies, but They Come with Risks," *The New York Times*, September 19, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/19/business/media/newspapers-billionaire-owners-magazines.html.

9 See, e.g., Bessner, *Democracy in Exile*; Patrick Porter, "Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment," *International Security* 42, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 9–46.

10 For more on this issue, see Daniel Bessner and Stephen Wertheim, "Democratizing U.S. Foreign Policy: Bringing Experts and the Public Back Together," *Foreign Affairs*, April 5, 2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-04-05/democratizing-us-foreign-policy.

11 Bruce Kuklick, *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 16.

12 See, e.g., Ryan Cooper, "The Empire Strikes Out: How American Empire Is a Net Drain, Even for Americans," *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* 53 (Summer 2019), https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/53/the-empire-strikes-out/.

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