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Discussion: a reply to Wallace

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In his review article in the July 1996 issue of this journal ('Truth and power, monks and technocrats: theory and practice in international relations') William Wallace wasted the opportunity to say some interesting things about an important issue. Because he has been seen by some to be making some necessary points about the state of International Relations in Britain in recent years, I wish to point out seven major problems in his argument. If I am correct about this then readers might wonder about the validity of his conclusions about the relationship between truth and power and theory and practice, but I will leave it to others to comment upon these.

Problem one: the picture of the profession

Throughout the review article there is a constant complaint that contemporary British academics in IR deny the relevance of day-to-day concerns (p. 302); indeed that they disclaim engagement with the world (p. 304). But to whom does this criticism refer? I cannot think of anybody in the profession who has ever denied or disclaimed in this way. Nor do I know of anyone who sees IR as 'abstract logical training for the youthful mind' (p. 301). (Note in this respect, though, the Foreign Office's traditional practice of filling its ranks with those whose 'good minds' had been trained by the abstract logic of conjugating Latin and Greek verbs.) The fact is that the article is based on a straw man, a quite erroneous view of the profession. Every academic in IR, however 'theoretical', to a greater or lesser extent does 'empirical' work. Whether it is Kenneth Waltz on nuclear proliferation or the future of the great powers, or Richard Falk on humanitarian intervention, engagement with concrete international problems is a crucial aspect of our work: it is central to our identity. Even Charles Manning, whose lectures left me wondering what it was all about, believed that the job of IR academics was to train people for diplomatic practice. Now, of course, not every piece of work done by every individual is explicitly 'theory *and* practice' as William Wallace would conceive it. But all the individuals he names and criticizes in the review article work on empirical areas. Perhaps he is not aware, for example, of Cynthia Enloe's micro-comparative politics, of countries as varied as Mexico and Vietnam and—he would be pleased—Britain. Equally, what of Steve Smith's work on bureaucratic politics or arms control? Nor does critical theory stop at the waterfront of theory, as is implied. It is being applied

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to a range of empirical areas (such as regional security) and as such has been published in *International Affairs*. I could go on. The point is that such facts would have spoiled the whole foundation of the critique. (Even the work of the 'postmodernists' in the profession against whom the article rails engages directly with world affairs: Bradly Klein's work on NATO and David Campbell's on Bosnia, for example. But neither of these individuals is mentioned.) Who, indeed, in this profession, actually does 'theory for its own sake' (p. 314)? All the people I know are interested in theory ('thought about thought') because they are interested in real people in real places.

Problem two: who excludes whom?

This leads to the point that the whole 'monk' theme in the review article does not work. It might do as knockabout for an after-dinner speech, but it does not as a piece of serious analysis. We are informed of the differences between Benedictines, Dominicans, Jesuits and Franciscans (p. 307), but why? These distinctions are not sustained throughout the text of the review. Instead they are slipped in as part of a generalized attack, in which name-calling substitutes for analysis.

The article regularly stresses the distance between 'academics and professionals', but it also quotes Keith Webb's survey showing that the majority of IR academics 'feel their expertise should be used more' (p. 303), and that academics do want to engage (pp. 317, 319). The problem here, then, is not with most academics, since they want to engage. The problem is that they feel excluded. Some, rightly, are said to self-exclude. I probably belong to this category, but this was only after I decided that such contact was generally unproductive, and that there were more promising audiences than Whitehall professionals. If one does not say what 'professionals' want to hear—or if one offers more than in-house criticism—then contact is certainly not welcome. The problem of engagement to my mind does not come from academics, but from the British political/administrative class, who themselves fear contamination from those who sometimes question their assumptions. For example, I well remember, in the nuclear debate in the 1980s, the vitriol levelled against those of us who did not share Whitehall's pro-nuclear norms. Subsequently there has been some 'conversion or retirement' on the part of some ex-professionals, and at least a degree of denuclearization is now seen as appropriate. Overall, I cannot think of any of my colleagues in BISA who, *on principle*, would not respond positively if a genuine exchange of ideas were requested by the FCO, a parliamentary committee or whatever (which I take to be a very narrow definition of the 'professionals' in the field).

In terms of speaking truth to power the article speaks with enthusiasm about those academics who were invited to sup with Margaret Thatcher (p. 320). This argument actually reinforces several of my points. These occasions show that when given the opportunity, academics will respond. More significantly, it also shows that those who might be invited on such occasions are always those seen as relevant in terms of the politician's ('professional's') own agenda. Those recognizing that Gorbachev favoured a new relationship with the West were welcomed by the Iron Lady. Those in the West favouring massive denuclearization—a favourite Gorbachev theme—were regarded by Thatcher as lunatics and fellow-travellers. Her priorities

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and interests ruled, UK? Did she ever invite specialists on nationalism in Eastern Europe, Islamic experts and so on? She did not invite Keynesian economists. The fact is that the Galileos of this world never get invited to working lunches by popes, and in some cases it takes centuries *even* before they get due recognition. Access should not be mistaken for influence.

Problem three: ethnocentrism

I emphasized the British dimension above, since many of the points made in the article could not be made about IR specialists in Scandinavia, Canada, Australia and parts of the developing world, where contacts between academics and 'professionals' are more common and positive. Nor could they be made about the much-criticized US IR academic community. I do not see any major differences in outlook between my academic colleagues in those countries and here, so the explanation for their different relationship with policy-makers must lie in the political culture in which they operate. They are not inhibited by the metropolitan-mindedness, professional rigidity, Oxbridge-clubbiness and class attitudes of the British political establishment. The failure to note this is one of several instances of ethnocentrism in the review article.

The review argues (pp. 312–14) that IR is remarkably derivative of US theorizing and intellectual fashions (a point more substantially made by several of the works criticized), and says we neglect the approaches of what is called 'our own region' (my own region is Wales and the world, but that is another discussion) or the 'European region' (presumably the article is not advocating that we pay even more attention to the approaches of the French post-structuralists who seem to upset William Wallace so much). In the attempt to put clear blue water between William's own perspective and that of the United States, a degree of Eurocentrism emerges which is astonishing. Replacing a US-centric perspective in IR by a Eurocentric perspective does not help much (since there are some areas—Cold War historiography and the future of nuclear weapons come to mind—where the US academic debate is rather better). More to the point, the review article ignores one of the most exciting things in IR in recent times, namely, the injection of ideas, perspectives and knowledge from Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. On all this the article is silent, a silence which speaks volumes about the particular and narrow IR which is being advocated.

The article criticizes me (p. 307) for asserting that the victims of world politics have an important perspective. This is presumably a manifestation of what is said to be the self-righteousness of academics like myself (pp. 304, 307). Self-righteousness consists of exaggerating one's own virtue. Arguing about the importance of the perspective of 'have-nots', the bottom-up view of world politics, seems to me to be a fundamental task for IR scholars, in both their empirical and theoretical work. Looking at the world through their eyes is theoretically revolutionary, not to mention the fact that empirically there happen to be more have-nots in world politics than winners. My argument is not based on self-righteousness but on the desire for less ethnocentric scholarship—something I have been trying to encourage for over twenty years. This point is reinforced by Shabbir Akhtar, a philosopher at the

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International Islamic University of Malaysia, who criticizes 'establishment liberals who mistake their own affluence for a universal condition'.[1]

Problem four: self-righteousness/self-indulgence

Let me take some of these issues further. The profession is accused of being too self-indulgent and self-righteous (p. 304). I am obviously included in this, for having written what is called 'an evangelical sermon' (p. 307) in the chapter closing *International Relations Theory Today*. I have just dealt with one aspect of this charge, in relation to the perspectives of victims. I am also said to be one of those who make a particular claim on 'truth and salvation' (p. 307). I make no such claim. Indeed I could not, since I do not have faith in 'the truth': what truth? whose truth? What William Wallace particularly objects to is my expressed fear of unconstrained Western consumerist culture and its impact on the environment (I also endorsed, at the same time, J. K. Galbraith's warning that the comfortable classes in the 'Culture of Contentment' are not disposed to act on behalf of those worse off than themselves). I say—hardly a contentious point, I would have thought—that the 'global environment will have to suffer much more before the global economy will really take seriously the need to treat it better'.[2] If William thinks such points are self-righteous and deserving of ridicule, then I do not think he and I inhabit the same planet.

Related to the charge of self-righteousness is the criticism of my views for being optimistic and neo-idealist (p. 310). Nobody who knows me, or what I have written, and understands words, would call me an 'optimist'. On the empirical point, nowhere have I ever said that serious dangers do not exist in world politics, or in some specific regions or issue areas (note the arguments above about the environment). However, I do believe that different attitudes and policies—a culture of discontentment—might turn things around, and in that sense I am an idealist. But I recognize the enormous power of regressive material and ideological structures such as the global capitalist system, exclusionary identities, and statist norms. On the semantic point, the article makes the familiar error of mistaking 'optimism' and 'hope'. So, just as this past summer I hoped Yorkshire would win the County Cricket Championship, I was not optimistic that they would do so. Likewise I hope that steps will be taken to create a just world society, but I am not optimistic.

The criticism of self-indulgence in the profession is mostly levelled at those characterized as postmodernists. However, since there is no discussion of that body of work, it is difficult to understand exactly what is feared. The article amusingly worries about the preoccupation of theorists with 'word games' (p. 311) but is itself brimming with them. For me it is vital that students of IR give language more attention than hitherto, as words shape as well as reflect reality. The 'security' literature in recent years, for example, shows how so-called word games are indeed world games; how words help constitute reality; and how words are politics. Of

[1] Shabbir Akhtar, 'Modernisation without Westernisation', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, December 1995.
[2] Ken Booth and Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theory Today* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 344.

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course some of this discussion may be badly done or not worth doing; but this is also the case with some empirical work. On word games and self-indulgence perhaps the article is criticizing Steve Smith and myself for our (separate) references to 'rationality' with respect to the Holocaust and Hiroshima (p. 310). The review conflates these two episodes, in a way the authors would not have done, to make a point about the moral sensitivities of the post-World War II Realists. It goes without saying that all decent people had deep 'moral contempt' for the Holocaust, but I am not aware of *widespread* moral contempt being targeted at the dropping of the first atomic bombs, which were seen as a speedy way to finish a terrible war. I am sorry to try and spoil the article's knockabout quality with a few facts and careful analysis, but the point is that the review does not address the critical arguments about the ostensible rationality of these defining events of the century—the Holocaust and Hiroshima. Here as elsewhere, the essay seems intent on attacking the authors rather than the argument.

Problem five: teachers and researchers in IR

Clearly the reviewer's experiences have led him to develop a distaste for those who profess the subject. The article regrets the way they have 'moved away from government' (p. 302), and contrasts the experienced people who taught IR in the past—former soldiers and diplomats, etc. (pp. 302–3, 318)—with those of us who have spent most of our adult lives in the subject.

Here again, I think the article has got it completely the wrong way round. Without doubt, those early professors with experience of 'affairs'—the Charles Websters and E. H. Carrs—brought important insights into the subject. However, there is now a more productive diversity in the discipline than ever before. It is no longer dominated by that clubby, Oxbridge, middle-class group of early exponents. (Note, in this respect, your reviewer's revealing indicator of size: the ability 'to meet round a college high table' (p. 302).) In recent decades the subject has been energized by people with very different social and intellectual backgrounds, as well as people who have travelled extensively, and not only as agents of the British Empire. Increasingly, the profession has also been forced to confront perspectives opened up by women. Established attitudes have been challenged by the outlooks of those of different races and cultures. And although the vast majority of those who teach the subject today may not have worked in government (the implicit definition of the 'professionals' in the article), they have engaged world affairs at least as directly by their support of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, Amnesty International, Oxfam, environmental groups, anti- and pro-nuclear activities and all the other ways of doing politics. Academic IR still has individuals who are closely involved with those admiringly called 'the professionals' in the article (does this mean 'academics' are not professional?). But it is also taught now by a much richer mixture of people, with many more points of contact with the real world. One of the major disappointments of the article as a whole is its very narrow conception of the real world in which theory is every day practised.

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Problem six: the history of Realism

The article criticizes the critics of Realism, myself included, for oversimplifying its ideas and for being ahistorical. I shall confine myself for reasons of space to the particular criticism of what I am supposed to have said, and make three points about a carefully weighed set of arguments. First, what I was addressing in my chapter was in part the oversimplification of 'Realism' by those who taught the subject in the 1950s.[3] I make the specific point that the subtleties of the 'profoundest founders' became lost at the hands of the less subtle 'disciples and interpreters' in the 1950s. (I guess that most of the latter, incidentally, were ex-National Service boys who had left school for a period of Cold War/British Empire duty and then went straight on to study and then profess IR). Second, I explicitly make the point that the work of Augustine, Hobbes and Machiavelli has often been 'decontextualised'.[4] This and the previous point are not likely to have been made in an ahistorical account of Realism, nor one which believed that Realism arrived with the Cold War, yet my chapter is criticized on both these counts. In fact, I would contend that the review essay itself made Realism more of one thing than it obviously has been. Furthermore, it should go without saying that there was debate about epistemology before the 1980s, but the point I was making, and which nobody but your reviewer seems to have misunderstood, is that many of the issues in this debate *began* to be asked in academic International Relations *only* in the 1980s. Third, the review essay seems to equate positivist ideas and Realism, and believe that the subsequent critique of positivism has been based on the Realist prescriptions that resulted (p. 309). This is not the view of the critics. Positivist thinking has informed many approaches in International Relations, including Peace Research as well as Realism, so it is not the prescriptions that have been at issue, but the method.

Problem seven: striking the right balance

The review article relentlessly attempts to strike a balance in the relationship between academics and 'professionals' in the real world; it talks of maintaining 'a certain distance', insisting on 'the sanctity of the university', but not constituting 'a closed monastic order' (p. 321). This calculated *via media* makes the essay sound reasonable and balanced, when actually it is not, for it seeks to discipline the discipline rather rigidly. The review rejects 'uniformity' and wants a 'healthy and tolerant diversity' (p. 303), but has nothing good to say about post-structuralists, critical theorists, neo-idealists, etc., and does not even mention feminists, historical sociologists, post-colonialist theorists and others. Similarly it claims that we should ask 'fundamental questions', but seems opposed to explorations in 'theories and meta-theories' or the questions 'postmodernists' ask (p. 311). The posture of balance is beguiling. The article warns that there are, 'of course', risks and dangers in a 'high' degree of engagement, but also points out that there are advantages (p. 319). The article's *via media* is so wide as to be meaningless, and produces more questions

[3] Booth and Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theory*, p. 339.
[4] Ibid., p. 333.

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than answers, though it tries to give the impression of having produced the latter. Which academic in IR would not position himself or herself between being a lackey of government and an isolated monk? The point is: *where* is the balance to be struck? And with *which* group of 'professionals'? On such matters the essay adds nothing to an old debate. Again, the article warns (pp. 318–19) against excluding 'all those contaminated by direct involvement with the world of policy' from the discourse and reading lists of our subject. The latter would, it says, 'emasculate our discipline' (a very revealing choice of words!), but who is wanting to exclude any, let alone *all*, such views? This is yet another misrepresentation in the cause of provocation rather than enlightenment.

Conclusion

In sum, the review essay attacks a straw man from an ethnocentric liberal top-down perspective, and then offers prescriptions that try to be everything to everybody. This does not constitute an adequate foundation on which to make more substantive points about the complex issues relating to truth and power, and theory and practice. Suffice it to say that truth/power and theory/practice are more meaningfully connected by the verb 'is' than by the conjunction 'and' (in whatever order the words appear), and that we are all theorists now, whether or not we recognize it, whether or not we like it.

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