IR Scholars Forum

An Introduction by Editor-In-Chief, Audrey Latura

As a discipline, social science does a lot of soul searching. What qualifies as social “science” and what does it really tell us about how the world works? The methodological and professional demands of academics on the one hand don’t always square with the realities of the individuals and institutions about whom social scientists are busy theorizing. This dynamic is clear in political science generally, and international relations in particular.

To consider this problem in a way that is both interesting and illuminating, we wanted to provide a platform for a nuanced, first-person perspective from international affairs scholars themselves. The goal was to explore the complicated relationship between academia and policy, and how we might better understand it. The result was this issue’s IR Scholars Forum, in which the Yale Journal of International Affairs invited five top scholars to weigh in on the following question: *In what ways has your own scholarly work in international relations given you insight into how policy-making should be conducted?* The responses we received are as diverse as the backgrounds of the respondents. Francis J. Gavin compares the misunderstandings and the ebbs and flows in the scholar-policy maker relationship to those of a romantic affair. Robert Jervis discusses his evolution from a strictly rationalist way of thinking about international relations to one that allows for the psychological and ideological tensions that effect world leaders. Marc Trachtenberg talks about the importance of power politics in determining policy outcomes, a move away from understanding international conflict in stark moral terms of “right and wrong.” John M. Owen IV stresses the balance between ideas and power, how states can use ideology much like a tool, and the international implications for power distribution. And Stephen M. Walt takes a candid look at his own scholarly history to explore the role of IR theory in policy-making more broadly, laying out suggestions for how to help close “the gap.”

In the essays that follow, the IR Scholars Forum offers readers a unique opportunity to see how these academics think about their work, their discipline, and how these impact their world.