

**History, Institution, and Processes:
A “Realist” and “Constructivist” View of
Studying and Teaching International Relations**

Yung Wei
Professor of Political Science
Shih Hsin University
And
President
Vanguard Institute for Policy Studies
15 Chi-Nan Road, Sec. 1
Taipei, Taiwan 100
Republic of China
yungwei@cc.shu.edu.tw

* Prepared for the Meeting of World International Studies Committee and CEEISA/ISA International Convention, Budapest, Hungary, June 26-28, 2003.

History, Institution, and Processes: A “Realist” and “Constructivist” View of Studying and Teaching International Relations

Yung Wei

The field of international relation has witnessed a mushrooming of new theories, paradigm, and conceptual frameworks. Some of these new theoretical thrusts are aimed at opening up new perspectives and research methods in examining the phenomenon of the international community. Others are focused more at criticizing the inadequacy of the so-called “mainstream” international-relations (henceforth I.R.) theories and methods.

The purpose of this short essay to provide a practical and maybe somewhat non-western view both on teaching and research in the I.R. field. In terms of teaching I.R., my concerns is with the students. As a teacher for more than thirty years, I have always asked myself the question: “How much must my students master in terms of new terminologies and theoretical constructs before he is allowed to examined the real day-to-day problems and issues in the real world of international politics and economy?” In this regard, both my mind and heart are with Alfred Whitehead when he expressed the opinion that if a field of human knowledge is full of general theories and yet is with scanty and trivial data analysis, it must be a backward field of science.

A survey of the political-science profession in different countries reveals that while American and European scholars devote a great deal of time and energy in developing new theories and paradigms, political scientists in other countries are more concerned with the analysis of concrete problems in the political arena.¹ This is especially true in the

¹ For examples, see various papers reporting on the condition of political science in various countries which were presented to the XVIIIth World Congress of the International Political Science Association, Quebec, Canada, August 1-5, 2000; including Jerome Lafargue, Université de Pau et Pays de l'Adour, “Cultivating a Spirit of Methodological Openness in the Quest for Disciplinary Legitimacy: The Case of Political Science in France”; Michael P. Crozier, University of Melbourne, “The History of a Problematic Discipline: Political Science in Australia”; Pierre-Antoine Schorderet, Université de Lausanne, “The Swiss Political Science Association 1951-1959: Towards a Reflexive Use of the History of Academic Disciplines”; Irene Delgado Sotillos, UNED, Spain, “The Development of Spanish Political Science: Towards a More Complex Discipline?”; Mustapha Kemal Al-Sayyid, Cairo University, Guiza, “Arab Perspective on Political Science”; L Adele Jinadu, Lagos State University, “Democracy and Development in Africa: Does Political Science Matter?”;

field of international relations.

Take the Republic of China on Taiwan as an example. When the behavioral approach had already made its mark in the United States in 1960s the academic community in Taiwan became aware of this new trend of research, most of the curriculum in the departments of political science and international relations were still heavily traditional emphasizing on history, law, and institution. As a product of this educational system, I might really think that it was a rather good learning experience for the beginners of international relations.

Having finished my undergraduate studies in diplomacy at National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan, Republic of China, I went to the United States in 1961 to pursue graduate studies in international relations and political science at the University of Oregon obtaining a M.A. in 1963 and a Ph.D. in 1967. During the six years of study at Oregon, I received a rather thorough training in the theories and methods of empirical political scheme. More recently, in my reading and research, I have come across the writings of the so-called “post-modernist” and “post-positivist” school. Although I may not agree completely with the theoretical and methodological thrust of this “new” approach, I do share their view that the “positivist-rationalist” approach might have been too status-quo in their research orientation and hegemonic in their attitude toward other types of scholarly discourse.²

In order to obtain an overall picture of the teaching and research in political science in general and international relation in particular in various countries, I collected a set of papers addressing the topic in the 2000 World Congress of the International Political Science Association. From the content of these papers, several things become clear: first, although almost all the political-science and I.R. discipline in these countries are influenced by the theoretical and methodological thrusts of

Takashi Inoguchi, University of Tokyo, “Why Japanese political Scientists Have Come to Focus on Japanese Politics”; Carlos Alba, Universidad Autonoma de Madrid, “From Authoritarianism to Democracy: Spanish Political Science in Perspective”; Theodore Venter, Potchefstroom University, “Conceptual Dispersion: The Case of South Africa”; Nikolaus Werz, University of Rostock, “Populism and Neo-Populism in Latin America: Parties and Populists in Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela”.

² For a critique of the “hegemonic” tendency of the American brand of international relations, see “The United States and the Discipline of International Relations: ‘Hegemonic Country, Hegemonic Discipline,’” *International Studies Review*, Vol. 4, Issues 2 (Summer, 2002), pp. 67-85.

the American academician community, they nevertheless have to deal with the concrete task of training teachers, public servants, diplomats, and other professions that may need a general political-science background. As a result, the majority of the department of political science and international relations choose to take a middle-of-the-road approach to teaching and research. That means: they would absorb some of the theories and methods of the American brand of political science and international relations yet retain the traditional emphasis on political philosophy, history, and law.

The second distinct feature of the political science profession in most countries is that their membership is relatively small in comparison with their American counter part. While membership of the American political science community runs into tens of thousands, most of the political-science association in other countries number only a few hundreds. This very fact functions to reduce the seriousness of methodological debate in these countries on the one hand and enhance the need of the division of labor among various sub-fields of political science as well as international relations on the other.

The third common feature of the non-North-American political science profession is its closer linkage to government operation and real politics. As a result, the political-science department either function as the training ground for government workers or practicing politicians. The former became a part of the ruling elite, whereas the latter became either socio-political critics or members of the opposition parties. Only a small fraction of political science or I.R. students eventually become full-time teacher in political science or international relations.

Based upon the above survey and observations of the conditions of the discipline of political science and I.R. in most countries, plus the personal experience of this writer who has been trained both in Taiwan and the United States and have taught in either place for more than ten years, I would venture to make the following recommendations for non-North-American countries in regard to teaching and research in political science in general as well as in I.R. in particular.

First, I strongly believe a sound training in I.R. must include a

basic training both in the history of the world and especially the diplomatic history of the country wherein the I.R. profession is located. Since most of the textbooks on world history are written by North American or Western European authors, they basically reflect the perspectives and values of the Western World. Hence some rewriting are needed before using these books for classroom instruction. Despite the fact that many of the “new” states have become independent for more than half a century, very few of them have produced objective and critical history books on their relations with other countries. The existing books in this areas often fall into two extremes. They either follow the narration and judgment of North-American or European authors, or they reveal a strong anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, and even xenophobic inclinations, thus failing in presenting an objective as well as critical view of the international society to the students. More efforts in research and writing are clearly needed here.

The second area of emphasis should be placed on the institutions of international relations. Here I mean the norms regulating transnational interactions, the international organizations dealing with inter-state relations, and various mechanisms that facilitate the actual conduct of inter-governmental business. In terms of norms regulating inter-state interactions, international law, conflict of law, and treaty laws should be included in the curriculum in the I.R. department, especially those department and schools aiming at the training of diplomats and civil servants in the foreign service of a country. In regards to international organizations, courses on the United Nations, WTO, UN special agencies, and the European Union should be included; so are courses on important non-governmental organizations. Knowledge on the structure and function of these important organizations are indispensable for anyone who wants to have a basic grasp of the day-to-day operation of the international community. Finally, a curriculum of I.R. would not be complete without at least a course on diplomatic practice; its history, its institutions, and its actual functioning in today’s inter-governmental transaction.

Finally, a program on I.R. teaching and research would not be complete without subjects touching upon the process of international relations. Hence I would include subjects and themes dealing with the

formation of the external policy of a country, the public-opinion making, the mass media, the foreign-policy elite, the foreign-policy related parliamentary (Congressional) process, psycho-cultural dimension of inter-state relations, the political economy of transnational interactions, the pursue of the maximum value with minimum cost in a rational game by a state in international relations, and the impact internal socio-political cleavages on the external policy of a country. These are all worthy yet complicated subject that need to be examined and introduced to students of international relations.

In the course of reading this short essay, you may have noticed that in making various observations and recommendations, I have deliberately put aside concerns over different approaches and orientations in the I.R. field. In doing so, I have taken the position of a “realist” and “constructivist”: a “realist”, because of my concern is more with how much I can really make a student learn about I.R. without overburdening him with all the jargons and paradigms; a “constructivist”, because of my dissatisfaction both with the post-Westphalian World order and the over conceptualization of the I.R. discipline as we have been trained in North America and in West Europe. With this concluding remark, I humbly submit my opinion for your advice and criticism.

-end-