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 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.1 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...
The Profession: Practical Reflexivity and Political 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 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; 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).

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).

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
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 situating 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 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

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.
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


