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03/25/2015 - 12:41

The dangerous disregard of nuclear experts for one another

Hugh Gusterson

This year's meeting of the International Studies Association (ISA) in New Orleans began on the first day of Lent. The gaudy street parades and drunken revels of Mardi Gras subsided and, as city workers swept up colored beads from the streets, the academics converged on downtown hotels for four days of serious discussions about global security and development.

Noting that there were no less than fifteen panels on nuclear weapons issues on the ISA program, one speaker declared that we are in the midst of an academic "renaissance in nuclear studies." But much of the "renaissance" looks more like recycling than rejuvenation, and it has created an intellectual terrain that is oddly partitioned.

As a quick glance at the ISA program shows, academic discussion of nuclear policy at the conference took place within two distinct intellectual communities. One puts together panels and papers with titles such as "behavioral economics and nuclear weapons," "security guarantees and nuclear weapons development," and "extended deterrence and tactical nuclear weapons." The other group's offerings have such titles as "nukes and norms," "nuclear values," and "post modern nuclear thought."

The camps are divided from one another along two axes.

The first axis is methodological. On one side are those who accent the science in political science. They believe that national interests are given, and that their pursuit is best understood in a language of variables, correlations, and bargaining. They love to talk about carrots and sticks, as if national leaders were donkeys responding to stimuli.

On the other side are the analysts, broadly influenced by European philosophical thought, who believe that national interests are as much constructed as given, and that human behavior must be understood in terms of ideology, culture, narratives, and norms. (For the record, my own academic work has been in this second tradition.)

The second division is between self-styled "realists" who assume that nuclear weapons cannot be abolished, and "analysts" willing to discuss the abolition of nuclear weapons as a policy possibility. The first group tends to focus on the actions and interpretations of national decision-makers, especially those from the nuclear armed states, while the second asks whether nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and non-nuclear states might find a way to maneuver the major powers toward the abolition of nuclear

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weapons or, failing that, to much smaller stockpiles oriented to minimal deterrence.

These two bifurcations overlay each other fairly neatly. The “norms and narratives” analysts tend to also be more interested in the impact of those acting outside the national security state and more open to the possibility of nuclear abolition than those who strive for stable nuclear deterrence within the vocabulary of science.

The distribution of these two intellectual communities across universities follows a striking pattern. The nuclear “realists” can be found in the major elite political science departments of the United States. They assume the voice of objectivity as they map the variables that underlie proliferation and dismiss prospects for nuclear abolition, and the US government is most likely to turn to them for advice. With the recent death of the University of California at Berkeley’s Kenneth Waltz, the dean of this community is John Mearsheimer at the University of Chicago.

Meanwhile, the other community is stronger in European and Canadian universities, and its members have found refuge in the United States in some small colleges and second-tier political science departments. This latter group includes figures such as Tom Sauer at the University of Antwerp, Jutta Weldes and Benoit Pelopidas of Bristol University, and Thomas Jonter of Stockholm University.

The bifurcation at ISA mirrors a larger split in global security discourse. On one hand, as the United States telegraphs its commitment to [modernize its nuclear weapons](http://bos.sagepub.com/content/71/2/107.full) (<http://bos.sagepub.com/content/71/2/107.full>) and retain them as instruments of statecraft, it is clear that US national security elites, together with their cousins in Moscow, London, Paris, and Beijing, have an outlook that makes it impossible for them to imagine a world without nuclear weapons. If nuclear weapons are abolished, it seems likely that it will not be through a process led by the United States but—like the negotiation of the treaties banning landmines and cluster munitions—through a process that the United States to some degree opposes.

Thus, the impetus for a nuclear weapons ban today comes from nongovernmental organizations and European and developing-country diplomats. The push for a ban by groups like the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) is the major development at the moment in nuclear weapons policy.

But to the realists, NGOs and non-aligned diplomats are marginal actors when it comes to nuclear weapons policy, which is made by hard-headed decision-makers in the capitals of the major powers who operate in a hostile global security environment that imposes powerful constraints on their actions. Activists scarcely register in their analytic frames. Only time will tell if their “realism” is realistic in this regard, though historians would surely remind us that activists played a major role in winning the Limited Test Ban Treaty and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, as well as the bans on landmines and cluster munitions.

At the ISA conference the two speech communities operated in parallel worlds, rarely debating each other directly. (One notable exception came in a round table discussion where Patrick Morgan, a nuclear realist from the University of California, Irvine, scoffed at Sauer’s talk of a global convention banning nuclear weapons). But maybe this lack of communication is inevitable since the two communities operate within what Thomas Kuhn would have called incommensurable paradigms. Still, it was disconcerting to come away from the conference with the perception of two small intellectual communities talking past each other on the same topic—the topic being the most serious international security dilemma in the world today. If we are to solve the nuclear problem, we will need the combined insights of both communities.

In this context it might help to recall that, while the realists are portrayed as conservatives by their critics in the debate on nuclear policy, they were outspoken opponents of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Leading realists such as Harvard’s Stephen Walt and MIT’s Barry Posen spent no small amount of their own money to take out an ad in the *New York Times* [warning of dire unforeseen consequences](#)

(<http://www.bear-left.com/archive/2002/0926oped.html>) if the United States invaded Iraq. As Walt pointed out in a [forcefully argued retrospective piece on the Iraq invasion in Foreign Policy](#). (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/06/who-was-right-about-invading-iraq/>) many liberal human rights hawks supported that invasion.

Back in my hotel in New Orleans, the receptionist told me you have to give something up for Lent. How about we give up ignoring those who disagree with us on nuclear weapons?

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Rod Adams • a day ago
When will nuclear weapons policy works stop using shorthand by calling themselves "nuclear experts." There is a great deal of material in nuclear science and engineering on which most of them are virtually clueless.

Though vast quantities of money have been frittered away in weapons developments and trying to figure out ways to control them, the devices have not been used -- a hugely positive fact -- for their design purpose since 1945.

We could just stop wasting time, resources and material and simply convert as much of the infrastructure as possible into facilities to empower people with useful electricity, heat, and motive power.

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Selim Sazak • 2 days ago
Btw, scholars in the U.S academic mainstream are also taking note:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi...>

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CDReader123 • 7 days ago
This is so disheartening to hear. It sounds like the people who are thinking about nuclear policy are totally out of touch.

I think that a lot of the divisions you note completely ignore the actual situation the world faces. Nuclear policy in the US seems to be stuck in between the fantasies of 'realists' and idealists'. I think everyone should read Jonathan Schell's book, "The Seventh Decade" to get some perspective on what is happening in the world.

I can say, as someone born after the Cold War, that the threat of nuclear war seems more likely now than it was during the Cold War.

I say this because there are more states with nuclear weapons than during the Cold War, most of whom are unstable or hostile to one another. Moreover, there is no real international framework for arms control.

More to this latter point, Schell drives home the point that the Bush administration's approach to nonproliferation was unilateral American aggression, Iraq being the best example This only served to increase the

see more

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Nina Tannenwald • 7 days ago

Hugh, nice piece. I agree with the general argument. As a participant on one of the panels at ISA that you endured, er, attended, I can attest to the rather insular nature of the discussion.

I would correct a couple of things, though. No one in the US government looks to John Mearsheimer on the nuclear issue, just as not a single policymaker ever agreed with Waltz' argument that proliferation is good. The belief that proliferation is bad is a widely shared and deep social construction (to use the language of my tribe) in the policy world. Waltz never made a dent in that belief. To that extent, his argument is purely academic and completely un-influential in the nuclear policy world.

The Pentagon has quite a lot of realists, to be sure, but the State Department is full of liberal internationalists who believe deeply in the importance of international law and institutions for governing the nuclear domain---very un-realist. Obama, who talks the talk of disarmament (though doesn't actually do anything) certainly doesn't look to the realists for inspiration.

Now, maybe leaders in India, Pak, North Korea and Iran like the Mearsheimer/Waltz argument a lot....

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Anne I. Harrington • 8 days ago

Hi Hugh, I don't dispute your characterization of the divide in the nuclear expert community in its broad generalities, but you erase the work that scholars who cross that divide are doing to promote conversation. As you know, I work in what you have identified as a more European tradition. However, Jeff Knopf and I organized the 'behavior economics and nuclear weapons' panel at ISA. The panel came out of a conference we held last fall in DC on Real World Nuclear Decision-making. One of my goals in hosting the conference was to create exchange between scholars from different backgrounds and perspectives. At the ISA panel, two of the five panelist were from research institutes in Europe and two presented STS takes on the topic. There was one person on the panel who did a statistical analysis of deterrence outcomes and another paper on applying findings about justice from the cognitive/behavioral literature to the NPT. All in all it was an eclectic group and an interesting conversation.

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Hugh Gusterson → **Anne I. Harrington** • 8 days ago

Anne, I'm glad to hear that you were mixing perspectives in your panel, even if it does go against the grain of my broad-brush characterization. The week after ISA I went to a conference in NY organized by nuclear abolitionists. There were some very good papers, but it was a single community talking to itself. This has its place, especially for activists developing a point of view, but I really wish there was more talk across perspectives. And I'm struck by the degree to which the second perspective in my piece is excluded from the top political science departments -- a problem you ran into as a grad student, I think.

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Anne I. Harrington → **Hugh Gusterson** • 8 days ago

It's absolutely true that if you want to get a job at top US university in political science, questioning received wisdom about nuclear deterrence is a poor career strategy (just getting a PhD from one while doing it was hard enough). It is also true that in the American context the abolitionist and deterrence communities rarely sit around a table together. At

the same time, there are a number of fora, most of which are foundation funded, that bring together international groups of scholars to talk across this divide. For instance, I was at a terrific workshop in Australia organized by Frank Gavin and Joe Siracusa early this year where I had the dubious honor of chairing the panel on disarmament, which I found quite challenging given the composition of the room. In any case, I do not dispute your over all generalization, just wanted to call attention to the fact that there are others out there who agree with you that there is a problem and are trying to do something about it.

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Seth Baum • 8 days ago

Thanks, this is a very nice and helpful overview. For comparison, at this week's Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference, there was a very interesting session "Nuclear Use: Law, Morality and Humanitarian Consequences" featuring conversation between supporters of the humanitarian initiative and people who favor deterrence and step-by-step disarmament. I thought it was insightful and productive, and a good example of how to get these people to talk to each other instead of past each other. I'm hoping there can be more of this, and I somewhat worry that the humanitarian initiative may hit a dead end if it doesn't.

Here's the event link:

<http://carnegietsinghua.org/20...>

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