

H-Diplo ESSAY 348

Essay Series on Learning the Scholar's Craft: Reflections of Historians and International Relations Scholars

8 June 2021

Slowly and Slowly

<https://hdiplo.org/to/E348>

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From about the time I was twelve, my father and I would stay up late during summer nights discussing politics. As an immigrant to the U.S., he focused our conversations around international relations, although I didn't quite realize it at the time. Our talks ranged from the political to the personal. I remember clearly a common refrain. Whenever I would complain, he would reassure me that things would change. "Slowly and slowly," he would say, it would all work out.

My first real academic encounters with international relations scholarship were, as for most of us, in college. I loved my undergraduate years. I remember calling my parents from my dorm room, after having spent the first of many afternoons in the stacks at Harvard's Widener Library, to thank them for sending me. As a Social Studies major, I enjoyed a great deal of flexibility in course selection. But my luckiest stroke was when I walked into Louise Richardson's office asking if she might hire me as a summer research assistant, and she said yes.

Richardson was a critical role model. Here was a smart, successful woman with a strong family life, doing incredibly interesting work. She tasked me with trying to locate and identify international institutions in the nineteenth-century Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which forced me to reckon with what I thought counted as an institution. I was sold, both conceptually and empirically, on this kind of scholarship.

When it came time to write my senior thesis, Richardson connected me with another role model – Lisa Martin. Martin helped me frame a project on the democratic deficit in what was then called the European Community, and encouraged me to travel to Europe to conduct interviews with British and Danish MPs. Once again, I was hooked, even though – if I'm being honest, and in retrospect – I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. To this point, as I completed the thesis, Martin pressed me on whether my argument about the EC's democratic deficit was generalizable to international institutions. "Yes," twenty-one-year-old me replied earnestly. "It applies to the entire EC."

This embarrassment notwithstanding, Martin and Richardson generously wrote me recommendation letters, and I was admitted to Stanford. I deferred for a year to work at the Arias Foundation in Costa Rica, and am glad that I did.¹ I think it's essential to take at least a year off between undergraduate and graduate work, if circumstances permit. As I often say to my students: "You've been in school since you were four!" I learned a great deal at the Arias Foundation, including that I preferred the academy to the policy world.

What I'm about to write might be an unpopular opinion, but I loved graduate school. Stanford's Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) quickly became my intellectual home, with its interdisciplinary focus, regular rotation

¹ The Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress was founded by Óscar Arias Sánchez, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 for his role in helping to negotiate the end of Central America's civil wars in the 1980s.

of outstanding fellows, and sociologist Lynn Eden incessantly prodding us all to do our best work. Being able learn from colleagues like Page Fortna, Marie-Joelle Zahar, Ron Hassner, Taylor Fravel, Alex Montgomery, David Edelstein, Jeremi Suri, and many others I am sure I have neglected to mention, rounded out my graduate education in ways for which I will always be grateful. Fortna, in particular, became a dear friend and, subsequently, a colleague at Columbia.

I also found an unfailingly generous dissertation advisor in Scott Sagan. Sagan hired me as a research assistant at a time when constructivism was (or at least seemed) new – for example, Alexander Wendt’s *Social Theory of International Politics* had not yet been published.² After attending a presentation on the work of this new breed of scholar,³ Sagan wondered if the constructivists were right – militaries often did behave irrationally – but also that neorealists were right, and that such irrational behavior would be punished by the international system. Upon hearing this argument, I protested, pointing out that while we often assumed the existence of a selection mechanism in international relations, we didn’t even know what the death rate of states *was*, let alone whether it was governed by such a mechanism. Rather than being affronted or defensive, Sagan’s response was along the lines of: “You’re right. Why don’t you work on that?” This was also to be the first instance in a pattern in which I stumbled into a new research question because I was annoyed.

I learned a great deal from my dissertation advisors. Steve Krasner taught me that false starts were OK. Even though he worried about my proclivity to ask questions he thought might be too big, his praise when I abandoned a project where I was more interested in my pet answer than the overarching question has always stayed with me. I took away a key lesson: start with a question, not with an answer. From Sagan I learned more than I can say, including to always consider alternative explanations, that being theoretically ecumenical can be a strength, to take joy in sifting through archives like a detective, and to always be sure of my sources (and to never split infinitives).

Of course, I also learned about myself as a scholar. To my advisors’ sometimes-chagrin, I kept being attracted to big, unanswered questions like “Why don’t states seem to ‘die’ anymore?” Over time, I have realized that it is questions about macro-historical change that I tend to find most appealing. On a daily basis, international relations is dynamic. But major change is rare. Often, it occurs “slowly and slowly.” Investigating the causes and consequences of those inflection points and longer-term trends was what most intrigued me.

After graduating in 2001 and spending a year at the Olin Institute on a post-doctoral fellowship, I began a tenure-track position at Columbia. This was a dream job for me, both intellectually and personally. One of the strengths of the department was the sense of community fostered by the “Jervis lunches.” Because so many people lived close to campus, many of us worked in our university offices. Bob Jervis took the water cooler conversation one step further, gathering up whichever interested faculty were available on a given day for lunch. These lunches were intriguing, funny, and fun. By some implicit agreement, we rarely discussed our own research, but instead focused on politics and political science more broadly.

I very much miss the sense of community those lunches fostered. I got to know colleagues outside my subfield quickly, and they me. But I must admit that I was always intimidated during those meals. To be sure, part of my discomfort stemmed from being an assistant professor lunching with the senior faculty in my department. Witty repartee, in abundance at these lunches, has never been my strength. I was frequently the only woman in the room. Alternatively (or simultaneously), I would be the only person of color in the room. It was not unusual for me to be called upon to render an opinion on behalf

² Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³ Early work from many of these important authors is collected in Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *Culture of National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

of all women, or on behalf of all people from the unspecified and varying parts of the globe people thought I might represent (to set the record straight, I am a mix: my mother is Puerto Rican and my father was from Bangladesh).

I spent 11 eventful years at Columbia. I got married. I published my first book.⁴ I had a child. My father fell ill, and I spent a fair amount of time shuttling back and forth between NYC and Long Island to spend time with him. My father died, and I had a second child. Throughout all this time, I was desperately trying to publish articles out of my first and then second project, to no avail. More than a decade later, I honestly still don't quite understand what I was doing wrong. Many of the articles I was trying to publish consisted of quantitative analyses of the implications of international norms, and a typical set of reviews consisted of a constructivist disliking the method, and a more quantitatively-oriented scholar disliking the argument.

Perhaps my work was not very good. Perhaps I was just unlucky; more than once, an article would be out for review for a year or more. Perhaps I was too easily discouraged. In retrospect, I could have used more active mentoring. It would have been helpful to have someone tell me that I needed to be writing more, be more aggressive with editors, aim for lower-ranked journals, or all of the above and perhaps something else, too. A smarter strategy might have been to choose a second project closer to my first project, but I'd seen that strategy discouraged in my department. I also wasn't particularly well-networked in what I see now were the two main international security "camps" (there is much more cross-pollination today, but at the time people very much seemed to stay in their intellectual corners) – Peace Science/Conflict Processes on one side and traditional security studies on the other – nor was I well-positioned to adopt the publishing strategies used by many scholars in those groups.

And so, it felt like my career was disintegrating...slowly and slowly. By default, Columbia has a long tenure clock, and I had lengthened mine with two parental leaves. It's also extremely difficult to get tenure at Columbia; apparently, the department had received twenty review letters for me. With only one book and one peer-reviewed article by the time of my review, I was denied tenure.

A great deal of self-reflection followed (and, of course, preceded) this news. I'm not a big believer in regrets, unless of course I've wronged someone. While I had been advised not to have children on the tenure track, I have no plans to give mine back. Nor do I regret spending time with my father when he was ill. The ostensible problem was one of quantity: I simply hadn't published enough. I had tried, but the truth is that I'm not a high-volume scholar. It's not worth it to me to publish for the sake of publishing. I'm also not a scholar who fits, or stays, in a lane. This position is profoundly unstrategic, I realize, but there it is (it probably also didn't help that my letter-writers hadn't been told I'd had two years of parental leave, but we'll never know).

After being denied tenure at Columbia, I was lucky to land a position at Notre Dame. But there was a catch. While the position had been advertised as a senior line, and while I had published more in the interim (indeed, I had been told, enough to put me over the "bar" at Notre Dame), in the end, they hired me as an untenured associate professor. Once I had taught enough of the right type of class at Notre Dame, I was reviewed again, and finally received tenure in 2016.

In case the math isn't clear, it took me fifteen years to be tenured.

My tenure denial was hardest on my family. Kids are resilient, but mine had a tough time moving from Manhattan to northern Indiana. We were also moving away from my newly widowed mother. This move (and our later move to

⁴ Tanisha M. Fazal, *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Minnesota) never would have worked if my husband hadn't shifted to part-time work. I am profoundly grateful that he made this change, which ended up improving the lives of everyone in our family.

Moving was a challenge for me professionally as well. Not only did I have to learn an entirely new and quite complex institutional landscape, but the imposter syndrome that I had always felt deepened significantly. I doubted myself constantly. Had I only been hired because I was a woman of color? I am sure many people thought that was the case. It's hard not to ask yourself that question when, on a regular basis, you are the only [fill in the blank] in the room. The other authors who have recently contributed to this series—scholars whom I deeply admire, like Mary Dudziak,⁵ Jim Goldgeier,⁶ and Sara Mitchell⁷—have been full professors for years, while I was only promoted last year. Have I been asked to write this essay because there are so few senior women of color in this field? Quite possibly.

I'm starting to believe though, that because humility is essential to scholarship, any good scholar is likely to be afflicted with imposter syndrome. Yet I'm acutely aware that there are those who don't believe that I deserve my vita. At one of the last pre-pandemic meetings I attended in Washington, DC, I was talking with a very prominent and senior IR scholar about the lack of women in IR at his department. The conversation then shifted when he turned to me and said, "You know, most men, when they hear a woman has won an award, think she won it just because she's a woman." In the moment, I was too flummoxed and flabbergasted to issue a coherent (let alone clever) reply. Later, I realized that this man was essentially telling me that I didn't belong in the room. Or at least, that's what he thought.

I'm never going to be able to change that man's mind. But what I can do is help minimize the likelihood that I'm the only [again, fill in the blank] in the room. Here, I've learned a great deal from watching incredible scholars and dedicated mentors like Sara Mitchell, Ashley Leeds, and Page Fortna, who have been warriors in making the field more welcoming for women scholars. My demographic profile confers a slightly different comparative advantage. The set of women of color in IR who are full professors in the U.S. is quite small. For me, taking this number seriously means actively mentoring junior women—including and especially junior women of color.

Engaging in mentoring has been exceptionally rewarding. I am constantly impressed by, and always learn from, the younger scholars with whom I am fortunate to spend some time. I do worry a bit when they point to me as a role model; indeed, that's part of the reason I agreed to write this essay. I don't recommend my particular career trajectory, with its ups and many downs, to others. I'm also naturally shy, and feel I often stumble and say the wrong thing. What's heartening, though, is how wonderfully ambitious, committed, and *smart* these women are. I wish I'd had *them* as role models.

The good news is that these women have been incredibly successful professionally. They are publishing, getting tenure-track jobs, and making a difference in the world with fierce confidence. The bad news is that the numbers are still small. Things are only changing slowly and slowly. We are all impatient not to be the "only" in the room.

Mentoring, and being mentored, is an excellent way to "learn the scholar's craft." It's also especially important for learning how to navigate a career. While I was lucky to stumble into terrific mentors very early in my scholarly journey, we need different mentors at different stages of our careers. I only began to seek mentorship actively a few years ago. Now that I am

⁵ Mary L. Dudziak, "This is Not a How-To Guide," H-Diplo Learning the Scholar's Craft Essay, 26 January 2021; <https://hdiplo.org/to/E307>.

⁶ James Goldgeier, "Entering the Profession at the End of the Cold War," H-Diplo Learning the Scholar's Craft Essay, 26 May 2020; <https://hdiplo.org/to/E235>.

⁷ Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, "The Path from Iowa Farm Girl to Iowa Professor," H-Diplo Learning the Scholar's Craft Essay 16 March 2021; <https://hdiplo.org/to/E325>.

officially “mid-career,” I’m extremely grateful to scholars like Marty Finnemore for being such generous sounding boards. While I know that many of these essays are aimed at early career scholars, mid-career scholars face a number of important decisions for which there are few guidebooks. At a certain point, you have to decide how you want to contribute to the discipline – via association work, journal or book series editing, directing a research institute, university administration, or something else.

Beyond serving as a mentor, I’m not sure what’s next for me. In the interim, I’m very much enjoying having the time to work on my own research. I’m itching to get back to the archives, once it’s safe to do so. I feel like I’ve finally figured out my writing process – I’m of the “drafty draft” persuasion – and am eager to go through the pages of my past notes to discover which of my comments to myself take me in new directions, and which make no sense. One of the many holes the pandemic has left for me in this past year has been policy engagement; I find attending conferences with colleagues in the policy world to be extremely fruitful (hopefully, in both directions), and I look forward to those future conversations.

I’m just about at the word limit, which reminds me of something else I’ve learned about myself along the way: I’m terrible at writing conclusions. This kind of essay feels like it’s supposed to be a sort of professional coda, when I’m pretty sure I’m closer to the middle than the end of my career. So, to conclude: In reflecting upon my scholarship to date, it makes sense to me that most of it has been question-driven. Grand IR theory has never been my passion. But in thinking about the questions I’ve asked about macro-historical change, it strikes me that there is a potentially interesting through line. States don’t “die” anymore (at least, not violently). Instead, because conquest is frowned upon today, would-be conquerors turn to alternative means to achieve their same ends; the same states that used to be at risk of being taken over by their neighbors have been the subject of multiple foreign-imposed regime and leader changes.⁸ States don’t issue formal declarations of war anymore, instead sidestepping the formalities of war to limit their international legal liability.⁹ States seem to go to war with each other much less than they used to, but that apparent decrease is driven at least in part by improvements in military medicine that have shifted casualties from the fatal to the nonfatal columns.¹⁰ The appearance of change is often deceptive, but even these deceptions may be harbingers of change. I’ve been mulling over possible theories of change in international relations, but haven’t quite figured it out yet. Hopefully, I’ll get there. Slowly and slowly.

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⁸ Fazal, *State Death*.

⁹ Fazal, *Wars of Law: Unintended Consequences in the Regulation of Armed Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

¹⁰ Fazal, “Dead Wrong? Battle Deaths, Military Medicine, and the Exaggerated Reports of War’s Demise,” *International Security* 39:1 (2014).