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

"Complex Institutions in a World of Change"

Essay by **Kathryn C. Lavelle, Case Western Reserve University**

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Series Editor: Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: Christopher Ball

There is a saying that the only two institutions to survive the Middle Ages are universities and the Catholic Church. While historians may debate the truth of that insight, my interests in the field of international relations and my own approach to the topic and teaching have been overwhelmingly influenced by my formative educational years in Catholic schools. The motivations and values they initiated were not so much doctrinal, but catholic with a little *c*, in the sense that they are universal, or world-wide. The orientation they offered me was institutional in the sense that from my earliest years, I could see immense value in the operational role of the Church throughout the world via its schools, universities, hospitals, homeless shelters, and refugee programs. At the same time, I also saw the contradictions and complexities inherent in the same institutions that frequently failed to uphold their professed values of love, compassion, and concern for others. Over the course of my career, these early experiences have helped me cope with similar inconsistencies in universities and other institutions as they evolve alongside political realities and can appear to be at odds with their missions.

Franciscan fathers ran my childhood parish in Cleveland, Ohio, and they emphasized their vow of poverty as it relates to the ownership of private property in their teaching. The Sisters of St. Joseph ran the parish school and nearby high school. They similarly impressed on us the dangers of placing too much emphasis on wealth, fame, or worldly glory in our lives and importance of social action. St. Francis of Assisi never earned the respect of political realists in international relations. However, he has become more relevant in the contemporary world as someone who was concerned the natural environment and the planet long before it was fashionable to do so.¹ Moreover, while the hierarchy of the Catholic Church is overwhelmingly male, my elementary school and all-girls high school were run almost exclusively by women. No one found it strange that I was the president of our Latin Club and competed in (and won) the same Latin oratory competitions as the all-boys high schools did. In 1980, a group of Cleveland missionaries were murdered in El Salvador because they were advocates for the poor.² Some Salvadorean refugees came to St.

¹ Climate Action, "The Patron Saint of Animals and Ecology," <https://www.earthday.org/patron-saint-animals-ecology/> Accessed 28 May 2024.

² See Stephanie M. Huevo, "The Murdered Churchwomen in El Salvador," *Current Events in Historical Perspective*, December 2020. https://origins.osu.edu/milestones/murdered-churchwomen-el-salvador?language_content_entity=en Accessed 28 May 2024.

Joseph Academy while awaiting permanent homes in the United States. These experiences taught me that we live in a global community that calls us to have a concern for others regardless of their nationality or social status.

When I looked for a college, I had a clear interest in international relations with the idealistic expectation that I would try to make the world a better place. Georgetown was a logical choice, and I enrolled in its School of Foreign Service program in international economics. However, the contrast between my high school and university could not have been starker: many of Georgetown's undergraduate schools had not accepted women until the 1970s. Thus, women on campus were still a novelty to some of the older Jesuits in the early 1980s. The priests themselves did not share the Franciscan view of poverty, but cultivated a sense of indifference to wealth in the Ignatian tradition, permitting more outward displays of affluence.

During my time at Georgetown, the student group Young Americans for Freedom invited Roberto D'Aubuisson to speak at an event held on 5 December 1984.³ D'Aubuisson was a former army major and unsuccessful presidential candidate in El Salvador. He was associated with the death squads that operated there when the Cleveland missionaries were murdered, and was rumored to have ordered the assassination of Oscar Romero—who himself had received an honorary degree from Georgetown for his advocacy for the poor. Years after the talk, the invitation continues to provoke reflection within the Georgetown community on the nature of free speech and expression.⁴ For me, it triggered suspicion about whose ideas were allowed to be debated, and the nature of the politics that underlay these invitations. The value I took from my time at Georgetown was the Jesuit notion of inquiry into everything. Many of our beliefs will fall away under this scrutiny. However, those that stand up to the rigor of radical interrogation will be those that sustain us for life.

Georgetown offered other incredible opportunities, not least of which was a summer study program in Dijon, France, where I lived with a family and learned to speak French. My plan was to pursue a career in the State Department or international organizations where I could improve on the gross asymmetries of opportunity and resources that existed in the world. While studying for the foreign-service exam, I became interested in Africa because so much American culture was influenced by people of African descent—yet the United States did not have a large diplomatic or economic presence there, relative to other parts of the world. After passing all components of the exam, I waited for an appointment to come through.

During that time, I commenced study towards a master's degree at the University of Virginia. Since many of my international relations courses were taught by Ken Thompson, Virginia was a baptism by fire into the philosophy of Political Realism as articulated by Hans Morgenthau, E.H. Carr, and Reinhold Niebuhr.⁵ I was equally fortunate to work as a teaching assistant where undergraduates challenged my thinking on

³ Joanne Omang, "D'Aubuisson Urges U.S. Back 'Contras' Openly" *Washington Post*, 6 December 1984. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP90-00552R000201450001-0.pdf>. Accessed 2 July 2024.

⁴ President John J. DeGioia, "Student Speech and Expression Forum, 3 February 2003. <https://president.georgetown.edu/speeches/student-speech-and-expression-forum/>. Accessed 28 May 2024.

⁵ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1974); Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964); Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932).

theoretical topics. In the summer between my first and second years, I completed an internship in the US embassy in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Teaching and learning about East Africa made me consider pursuing a doctoral degree, even if I would have had to change universities to do so. Life came to a sharp decision point near the end of my time in Charlottesville when—in the same week—I was offered a career appointment to the Foreign Service as an economic officer and a place in the doctoral program at Northwestern University with a guarantee of four years of funding. I was attracted to both opportunities for vastly different reasons. Yet I loved teaching so much that I thought it was worth it to try to pursue an academic career first, without ever really giving up on the diplomatic corps or other government service. Therefore, I moved to Evanston with the goal of studying the political economy of Africa and focusing on aid and development.

The world of international relations changed dramatically in these years. The Cold War ended. As a discipline, while political science grew more quantitative, comparative politics and regional studies retained a more historical institutionalist bent, catching many of us between methodologies. The gradual effects of these changes tilted the balance in the discipline towards projects that could attract federal funding for political scientists.⁶ I wanted to write my dissertation on African states in the international system—an inherently historical international relations topic—which made advising difficult because so few scholars worked specifically on these issues. Serendipitously, Tom Callaghy came to give a talk at Northwestern. He met with graduate students individually and told me that he was willing to provide advice on my thesis informally when he returned to the University of Pennsylvania. In one of our first exchanges after that meeting, he told me that Henry Bienen was coming to Northwestern, and suggested that I ask him to advise me as well. Thus, numerous individuals who advised me in a variety of formal and informal capacities made my dissertation on African states in the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) possible.

After receiving my PhD, I began a series of contract teaching positions at Cleveland State University. While there, I received a West Africa Research Association grant to travel to Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, and study its stock market. One of my early career goals had been to publish on African topics in mainstream international relations journals. When a piece from this project was accepted at *International Organization*, I was elated but thought I needed to set higher goals.⁷ Hence, I wrote my first book on emerging stock markets with African states as a foundational work, and not just one that was tacked on to studies of other markets with larger capitalizations.⁸ Using my undergraduate specialization in finance and experiences in the embassy, I argued in the book and other journal articles that the construction of the financial products themselves is political, and involves as many development goals as economic ones in financing firms in emerging markets. When a permanent position opened at nearby Case Western Reserve University, I moved there in 2001.

⁶ For a discussion of the controversy, see Jacqueline Stevens, “Political Scientists Are Lousy Forecasters,” 23 June 2012, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/24/opinion/sunday/political-scientists-are-lousy-forecasters.html> Accessed 29 May 2024.

⁷ Kathryn C. Lavelle, “Architecture of Equity Markets: The Abidjan Regional Bourse,” *International Organization* 55 No. 3 (2001): 717-742.

⁸ Lavelle, *The Politics of Equity Finance in Emerging Markets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Once I entered the tenure-track, my new colleagues Alec Lamis and Ken Grundy told me that the job of the department was to see that I was tenured. With this spirit of support and cooperation, I was fortunate to be mentored by so many outstanding scholars. At the time, the College of Arts and Sciences at Case Western was “small but mighty.” Small meant that I could walk down the hall and consult across disciplines. Mighty meant a range of eminent scholars. Among them, historians such as Dave Hammack, Alan Roche, and Carroll Purcell offered excellent advice on publishing. Humanists such as Kathy Karipedes in Dance offered insight into the human condition. Scientists like Roy Ritzman in Biology, and Bob Brown, and Phil Taylor in Physics were always willing to offer suggestions and encouragement when I embarked on new projects.

Once my book on stock markets was published, I received numerous consulting offers. Yet I remained more interested in the political aspects of finance than in profit maximization. My friend and colleague in Political Science, Frances Lee, had served as an American Political Science Association congressional fellow herself. In our collegial environment, we discussed the potential the fellowship held for someone with my interests to work on oversight of the international financial institutions on Capitol Hill. Unorthodox in the sense that I was not a traditional “Congress” scholar, I applied for the program and was accepted. I secured a position on the House Committee on Financial Services working for Chairman Barney Frank, whose chief of staff, Jeanne Rosanowick, was an outstanding example for women on the Hill.

The publications that followed combined my longstanding interest in the practice of politics with theoretical international political economy. While working on the committee staff, I planned my next book on Congress and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. I returned to Cleveland for a year, and then back to Washington on a sabbatical year at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars to write it. However, in the fall when I was back in Washington, the 2008 financial crisis exploded with a series of bankruptcies and bank failures that threatened the global system. Although I was at the Wilson Center, my former colleagues and friends on the Hill were thrust into the center of a rescue that combined public, private, national, and international financial institutions. At the Center, I was asked to explain Congress and the workings of the Federal Reserve in a series of brown bag, television, and closed-door sessions with policymakers. As a result, I learned how little people understood about how the American political system operates in this area.

Therefore, the 2008 financial crisis not only reshaped American politics, it doubled my research agenda. In the subsequent years, I completed two books: one on financial politics in the United States and the other on Congress and the IMF and World Bank.⁹ I offered a popular course at Case Western on financial politics that crossed the lines of economics and political science. However, the political system did not retain a longstanding policy interest in these issues, and it never became a substantive concern in American political science. After the passage of Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act in 2010, much of the industry went back to business. The anger many Americans felt over the crisis morphed into the Tea-Party movement and eventually broader populist efforts that called for a retreat from American overseas

⁹ Lavelle, *Legislating International Organization: The U.S. Congress, the IMF, and the World Bank* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Lavelle, *Money and Banks in the American Political System* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

involvement and intervention by those who felt that the globalization of previous years had left them behind.¹⁰

Since that time, the world has changed dramatically, and the social, religious, academic, and political institutions within it as well. The Catholic Church has been rocked by a series of child abuse scandals that have shaken the faith of many followers and prompted an exodus from many of its institutions.¹¹ Nuns are no longer a presence in Catholic schools as they were when I was a student. The American Conference of Catholic Bishops has shifted its political alignment to the right with increased emphasis on opposition to abortion.¹² Under political pressure from Congress, the National Science Foundation replaced its Political Science Program with two new programs—one in Accountable Institutions and Behavior and the other in Security and Preparedness.¹³ Recently, the war in Gaza has led many to re-open the premise of free-speech on campuses across the United States and debate the role of donors in university governance.¹⁴ Elite American universities are under attack for their admissions policies and pedagogy.¹⁵

As a result, many of the norms that underpinned American foreign policy and the structure of the global system have changed. In 2016, Jaya Chatterjee—an editor at Yale University Press—approached me to write a historical narrative on multilateralism. As we discussed the project, we felt that my interest and research in international organizations that had evolved since my dissertation would be ripe for a book-length treatment. My experience working in the State Department and on the Hill would also contribute to it. Thus, my research returned to my early interests in the United Nations and developing countries, while including new topics.¹⁶

The book was written with students in mind. Given all of the global changes and damage to institutions, the greatest challenge in teaching the next generation is no longer provoking them to question the truth as it is presented to them so that they can uncover their own, core principles, values, and beliefs. It is in convincing them that such a thing as the truth even exists. Today’s students do not view the nuclear arms race that dominated my early studies of international relations as the same level of threat as they view climate change. A land war in Europe and the ravages of armed conflict on civilian populations are far more real to them than they were in the era of détente with the Soviet Union.

¹⁰ John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016).

¹¹ For one example, see Jon Henley, “How the Boston Globe Exposed the Abuse Scandal that Rocked the Catholic Church,” *The Guardian*, 21 April 2010. Accessed 30 May 2024.

¹² Heidi Schlumpf, “Conservatives Still Rule the US Bishops’ Conference,” *National Catholic Register*, 3 June 2019. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/conservatives-still-rule-us-bishops-conference> Accessed 30 May 2024.

¹³ NSF, “An Update on Political Science at the NSF,” 19 December 2019. <https://politicalsciencenow.com/an-update-on-political-science-at-the-nsf/> Accessed 30 May 2024.

¹⁴ Emily Bazelon and Charles Homans, “The Battle Over College Speech Will Outlive the Encampments,” *New York Times*, 29 May 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/29/magazine/columbia-protests-free-speech.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare> Accessed 30 May 2024.

¹⁵ See Derek Bok, *Attacking the Elites*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024).

¹⁶ Lavelle, *The Challenges of Multilateralism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

When my book on multilateralism went into production, my colleague and friend from the Wilson Center, Liselotte Odgaard, approached me about joining her in investigating the rising role of China in the Arctic. We began a project that included travelling to Reykjavik, Iceland and Tromso, Norway to interview officials at newly formed international organizations and networks. Once again, I was thrust into a variety of forums where I was surprised at the lack of attention to the way that the United States government has conducted its relations—in this case largely through scientific bodies. Thus, researching the Arctic opened a whole new world that did not exist (as a region for study) when I was a student, yet might benefit from my length of experience in related areas. Like most scholars, I was grounded during the pandemic. Nonetheless, the shutdown and move to virtual forums had the positive effect that many previously inaccessible Arctic meetings were opened up on-line. Therefore, I was able to follow developments and continue to write about American foreign policy while living in Cleveland, and then as the pandemic abated, visiting archives elsewhere. The resulting book is currently in production and will open the next chapter of my teaching and research.¹⁷

Universities and the Catholic Church will no doubt survive the new millennium, albeit in dramatically changed forms. Looking to the future, I am still drawn to the motto and song of Northwestern University that has inspired me since I was a Latin student, “Quaecumque Sunt Vera” (Whatsoever things are true)—implore us as scholars and students to think on those things where we find honesty, justice, purity, good, or virtue.¹⁸ Unlike many academics, I have not specialized in a narrow aspect of international relations, but have investigated the political economy of multilateralism across contexts. For me, the scholar’s craft includes teaching. In both research and teaching, I have sought truth where the real world of politics intersects with theory and hope to continue to do so in the future.

Kathryn C. Lavelle is the Ellen and Dixon Long Professor in World Affairs at Case Western Reserve University. She is the author of *Reluctant Conquest: American Wealth, Power, and Science in the Arctic* (forthcoming, Yale University Press, 2025); *The Challenges of Multilateralism* (Yale University Press, 2020), *Money and Banks in the American Political System* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), *Legislating International Organization: The US Congress, the IMF, and the World Bank* (Oxford University Press, 2011), and *The Politics of Equity Finance in Emerging Markets* (Oxford University Press, (2004).

¹⁷ Lavelle, *Reluctant Conquest: American Wealth, Power, and Science in the Arctic*, (forthcoming Yale University Press, 2025).

¹⁸ See “University Motto” Northwestern University website, <https://www.northwestern.edu/studentaffairs/community/students/traditions.html#:~:text=%22Quaecumque%20Sunt%20Vera%20This%20Latin,the%20Greek%20city%20of%20Philippi>. Accessed 30 May 2024.