Interview – Taylor Robertson McDonald

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Taylor Robertson McDonald is a visiting scholar-in-residence at American University's School of International Service in Washington, D.C. His research predominantly examines the relationship between national identity and foreign policy. In particular, he focuses on America's historical allies like Canada as they navigate the increasingly tumultuous international order in light of rising challenges to U.S. leadership. From 2021-2022, he was the inaugural post-doctoral fellow at The Jagiellonian University's Taube Centre for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences in Kraków, Poland. His new book, *Identity Discourses and Canadian Foreign Policy in the War on Terror*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan as part of the 'Canada and International Affairs' series in March 2023. Exploring how discourses of Canadian identity were implicated in Canada's responses to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the book applies lessons from the 2000s to a new range of challenges facing Canada and NATO allies including the 'pivot' to Asia and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Where do you see the most exciting research or debates happening in your field?

One development I'm most excited about stems directly from my experience in the classroom teaching students of International Relations (IR). Since 2020, I've taught IR courses in Florida, Poland, and most recently, Washington, D.C., and in each environment, I found students increasingly curious about textual and discourse analytical methods they wish to implement in their own research. I suspect this is partly a product of the global pandemic that greatly limited students' ability to conduct other methods like field research and participant observation, given travel restrictions and uncertainties. Textual analysis, on the other hand, can better sidestep these uncertainties, but it is also seemingly driven by students' interests in investigating how various political actors – from right-wing populist movements to terrorist organizations and others – utilize social media to understand their rhetorical strategies. This makes discourse analysis a particularly salient methodological tool. More and more in my classrooms, young students are performing these analyses in research papers, Master's theses, and even their own publications and I hope that universities will match rising student interest with textual methods-based training, including at the undergraduate level.

I also see Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a true watershed moment that is bringing certain trends and tensions in the field into conversation. For example, research surrounding Russia's invasion continues to demonstrate the epistemological and methodological pluralism that exists in the field, as important research has engaged with various levels of analysis and theoretical approaches. At the same time, there appears to be hesitance to accept this pluralism as Russia's invasion strikes some as confirming the dominance of more traditional IR approaches focused squarely on hard power. This is not a new debate, but I do see it being hashed out by a new generation of scholars with potentially new outcomes.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Despite growing up in Canada, I did not initially imagine Canadian foreign policy occupying a central place in my research agenda. In fact, when I arrived at the University of Florida (UF) to begin my graduate studies, Canadian

politics was far from my mind. Interestingly, my fascination for Canadian identity and foreign policy was cultivated by being *outside* Canada – finding myself in a new environment, surrounded by new people and new conceptions of who Canadians are and what Canada means to Americans and others. Being geographically distant actually allowed me to critically reflect on common Canadian identity discourses I had been surrounded by for so many years – stepping outside the familiar environment allowed me to look back at it and analyze it. One thing this self-interrogation produced, which I have explored much further in my new book, is the tendency to cling to and associate with simple and familiar identity tropes, even more so than the specific meanings of those tropes. "Canada as the world's leading peacekeeping nation" is a popular one, but what it means that Canada acts as a peacekeeper and the central place peacekeeping has occupied in discussions of Canadian identity, have differed drastically over time, even while the simple notion continues to be repeated.

I also cannot overstate how impactful my introduction to interpretive methods through my dissertation advisor Ido Oren has been on my entire outlook. Specific training in interpretive methods is still a relatively scarce practice in many Political Science departments, and this is unfortunate. For me, learning about interpretive methods gave me the language and tools to express the kinds of investigations I had already been most interested in but lacked the frameworks to put into practice.

What is the importance of studying popular culture or narratives with respect to topics of IR?

Thinking about international relations through a discursive lens provides a necessary check on our propensity to want to 'know' and discuss the world through definitive and timeless concepts and 'truths.' This is especially necessary when it comes to discussions of identity in the current political climate where notions of identity (American identity, Ukrainian identity, Russian identity, etc.) have been the centerpiece of discourses surrounding domestic and foreign policies with serious global consequences. There remains a sense that political rhetoric serves only to distract populations from actions governments would take regardless of public sentiment (whether because of the demands of geopolitics or other factors) or that a certain national culture guides policy in relatively similar directions and produces certain patterns. I disagree. My research has leveraged discourse analysis to explore how the stories told about *who we are* are deeply implicated in *what states do* in the world, just as what states do impacts conceptions of who we are. In other words, studying world politics through discourses elucidates how tenuous many of the seemingly stable, long-established, ideas we have about the world actually are and how these ideas are constantly being challenged and re-negotiated over time. At the same time, these approaches encourage us to critically reflect as much on what is being said as what is being left out.

Thinking about Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, for example, we've heard plenty of politicians and analysts gravitate their readings of the war around narratives of NATO's resurgence ("the West is back") or narratives of European decline, like Time Magazine's cover from February 2022 that read "The Return of History: How Putin Shattered Europe's Dreams." But underrepresented in these large-scale competing narratives has been the incorporation of perspectives emerging from Ukrainians themselves and the experiences of East European countries that are omitted from these competing discourses of "the West's" resurgence or decline. Discursive approaches crucially draw attention to these critical absences.

With the rise in technology and the creation of a 'global citizen', how do you think the idea of a 'national identity' is changing?

Technology has opened up immense opportunities for connections and shared understandings unburdened by national borders. At the same time, it has produced new spheres of digital influence for state actors and new virtual battlefields to articulate their notions of national identity in cyberspace. Incredible research is being done to demonstrate how Russia's war in Ukraine is fought as much on the ground as it is on social media platforms where "trolls" seek to articulate a reading of history and identity that attempt to justify Putin's actions. In a much different way, democratically-elected governments have leveraged their social media presence to carefully brand political leaders and the countries they represent in particular fashions. On the other side, their political opponents have (some might say *masterfully*) leveraged social media platforms to offer their alternative visions in calls to 'save' the 'essences' of their countries they feel are under attack.

Yet, I wouldn't conclude that this is merely the same game playing out in a different venue. In 2021-2022, I was a post-doctoral fellow in Kraków at the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which instantly transformed Kraków into a lead receiving city of Ukrainian refugees, staging ground for NATO forces, and frequently hosted high-profile political leaders from North America and Europe. I witnessed first-hand how people from around the world identified with Ukraine, stood in solidarity with the country's people, offered donations, and proudly wore Ukrainian emblems – which continues today. Indeed, foreign nationals from various countries stand in solidarity largely because of the Russian military's brutality and blatant disregard for human rights and international law but also because the Ukrainian government, activists, and scholars have flourished in sharing their compelling stories across all mediums. In an era of increased global consciousness, the appeal of national identity narratives aims at a much wider audience that can, in this case, engender crucial support.

In your book, you discuss the role of popular narratives of state identity in shaping up foreign policies. With a rise in populism, how do you see populist discourses being implicated within foreign policy?

What stands out to me among different contemporary populist movements from the U.S. to Europe is their shared reliance on various simplistic and often ambiguous slogans or signifiers. "Make America Great Again" is an obvious one. However, populist movements increasingly cultivate around even more basic concepts like "the border wall" or "gender" that are conceptually flexible enough for various actors to incorporate them into discursive arrangements and draw together broad support even from relatively dissimilar groups. I've been fascinated with how these simple terms function in this capacity. At the level of foreign policy, my book explores prominent narratives of Canadian identity that circulate in Canadian society and how politicians articulated and adapted elements of those narratives in legitimizing Canadian foreign policies during the early days of the so-called 'Global War on Terror.' The book is animated primarily by exploring what narrative elements stayed the same and endured across foreign policy debates over several years, even while the meaning of these narratives shifted. Whether it was 2001 and Canadian Parliament was debating the country's involvement in what would become the Afghanistan War, or it was 2003 debating Canada's stance toward the invasion of Iraq, parliamentarians on all sides of debate habitually channeled their policy preferences through the narrative of Canada as America's neighbor – a seemingly uncontroversial geographic fact. Yet this neighborly relationship was articulated in different and often opposing ways across these debates and linked to opposing policies of intervention and non-intervention (were they friendly neighbors obliged to lend a cup of sugar or were they disparate neighbors that fate just happened to position next to one another?). This neighborly narrative shell endured, thanks to its popularity in wider Canadian society, even while politicians adapted its meaning.

Today, populist movements have excelled at popularizing these slogans and signifiers and helped to normalize their usage in government settings. Yet, the power of these simple and ambiguous terms comes from their widespread familiarity rather than their clear-cut definition. I'm currently working on an article that engages with fascinating research in Eastern Europe exploring how the term "gender" has acted as a "symbolic glue" binding together conservative groups, men's rights associations, and religious organizations, each with very different goals and visions, but mobilized by a unified disdain for "gender" and "gender ideology" which they associate with various negative connotations. These ideas have found their way into conservative government policies, including in Poland and Hungary. Right-wing populist movements have rapidly accelerated how 'mainstream' these signifiers become and streamlined their emergence into the parlance of decision-makers.

In your book, you also establish a relationship between narratives of Canada's national identity and its policy formations. Is this relationship unidirectional or do global policy challenges (such as pandemics, climate change or wars) also influence narratives of national identity?

My book begins from the premise that discussions of *who we are* are directly connected to discussions of *what we must do* in world politics, just as *what we do* influences conceptions of *who we are.* In this sense, notions of identity and international actions are at every moment co-constituting one another through political discourses of events. Unexpected international events present new opportunities to define (or re-define) state identities anew, just as adjustments to discourses of state identities can influence adjustments to foreign policies in response to international events like wars and pandemics. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, for example, saw a re-defining of

Canada-U.S. relations as more independent and competitive, with the Trump administration actively seeking to block shipments of PPE (personal protective equipment) from American companies to Canada after the border was closed. This shocked many Canadians who were used to the familiar notion of Canada and the U.S. as 'brothers' and 'the world's closest allies' during difficult times. Likewise, another project I'm currently working on examines the Canadian government's commitment to feminist-oriented foreign policies (following Sweden in 2014) in light of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that has seen Canada send lethal weaponry to the Ukrainian military (a move that some have criticized as anti-feminist). Russia's invasion has challenged dominant discourses of Canadian identity as a feminist state and the Justin Trudeau government has sought to re-articulate terms of Canadian identity as both feminist and a provider of arms to foreign militaries for use in deadly conflicts.

Topics of myths, assumptions, tropes, and their impact on foreign policy— which you research extensively are rather hard to quantify and establish a causality. What research methodologies would you suggest for navigating these challenges?

One of the most impactful and enduring influences on my research has been Roxanne Doty's *Imperial Encounters* where Doty succinctly differentiates *why* type questions from *how* type questions. *Why* questions tend to take for granted the stability of certain actors, identities, and conditions, to explain *why* states enact the foreign policies they do, relying on a more traditional notion of causality. *How* questions are concerned with how certain policies became possible and seen as legitimate options in the first place, focusing instead on identity and foreign policy narratives that compete to form the dominant framework through which world politics is understood in a given context. In the latter sense, a linear causality is not possible, as both the actors and their actions are at the same time working to produce one another co-constitutively.

My research reflects this latter insight, so I've approached the role of myths and tropes as playing key roles in this 'how does an event become possible' process in their ability to legitimize certain identity narratives by linking them to familiar assumptions about the national self. I've relied on a combination of discourse analysis (post-structuralist rather than critical), to flesh out the presence and function of these myths in relation to the time period specifically under study, combined with genealogical analysis, that demonstrates the historical presence, adaptation or even endurance of these myths that bring them into the contemporary period with a certain structure.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars in your field?

I'll offer two pieces of advice. First, if you can, spend significant time outside your comfort zone, whether that is outside your home state, home country, etc. Pursue study abroad opportunities or consider pursuing a graduate degree at a university in a different country than where you have lived most of your life. It is one thing to read about a new area, but something entirely different (and uniquely worthwhile) to live there. As much as you learn about new people and places, you end up learning more about yourself. In my case, this self-reflection inspired a dissertation and later a book!

Second, never deviate too far from the questions or topics that interest you most. Despite the pressures young scholars face to abandon certain topics or methods for those more likely to 'land you a job' or 'be more marketable,' at the end of the day it is your passion for what you study that gets you to the finish line – whatever that line may be. That passion also makes all the effort put into your research worthwhile.