Interview – David Campbell

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David Campbell is a writer, professor, and communications strategist, currently working as Managing Editor of VII Insider. He is Honorary Professor in the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland, Australia. He holds a Ph.D. in International Relations and for more than twenty-five years he taught visual culture, geography, and politics at universities in the USA, Australia, and the UK. David is the author of six books and more than sixty articles, most notably *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (revised edition, 1998) and *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity and Justice in Bosnia* (1998). He has produced visual projects on the Bosnian War, imaging famine, and the visual economy of HIV/AIDS, and collaborates on photographic, multimedia and video projects — all his work can be seen on his website.

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

I have a number of fields, as I discussed with Professor Roland Bleiker in a recent video interview. However, if my current, primary, field is understood as being concerned with the relationship between visuality and politics, especially international politics, then I think the most important questions and debates in this space concern the potential impact of images, how audiences consume images, and the effect of images on those audiences. Others will designate different issues as important, and I would not want to argue for the prioritisation of my concerns over all others, but I feel strongly that we have a lot more to know about the consumption and interpretation of images by audiences (and it is vital to stress the plurality of the idea of audiences, as there is no longer – if there ever was – a single, mass audience consuming or engaging media). We have done a lot of work on the production and circulation of images, but most arguments about the meaning and impact of images involve the projection of an analyst's interpretation of what they could mean onto audiences. There are, of course, some social psychology experiments in this space, and in communications studies there is some audience research, but for critical International Relations scholars there is much more to do to build on those insights and make them relevant for the analysis of images in international politics. In the last year I have started to sketch out some thinking about this (see this online article from May 2021; free registration required) and I am working with friends and colleagues in the University of Queensland's Research Program on Visual Politics to expand this work (see this online article from March 2022).

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

That's one large question! I think I would resist some of the question's framing by saying I have never set out to understand "the world" in the sense of trying to find a single explanation or framework that could grasp a totality called "the world". Most of all, and thinking well beyond my research agenda, I would say that the older I get the less I understand about contemporary politics generally. Watching events over the last five to ten years I am more often that not left scratching my head at the way epistemic issues of knowledge have been trumped (and, yes, that is in part a pun) by identity issues. If we look at the rise of national populists in European and North American politics (the likes of Johnson, Orbán, Trump and all their acolytes), and we think about the violent nationalism of Putin, and we reflect on how difficult it is for discourses based on evidence and rationality to puncture a point of resistance in these formations, how we can argue and fight for change is very perplexing.

This is made more difficult by the fact that most contemporary journalism is failing us, not because it is biased, but

because it is beholden to outmoded notions of "balance" and "objectivity". You can't be balanced and objective about people who deny the climate crisis. You can't be balanced and objective about people who seek to tear down the core institutions of democracy (independent media, the judiciary, free and fair elections). You can't be balanced and objective about people who think they can erase another country or another population. We need researchers and journalists who are committed to accurate, verifiable arguments in support of a democratic culture. That work can be done in a lot of ways and in a lot of sites, but all of it needs an explicit and progressive ethos to be worthwhile.

In your book, you argue that the United States' identity is constituted through foreign policy and through the interpretation of danger posed by others. Why do you think the US stands out in this regard?

Writing Security does not argue the US stands out in this regard – that would be a claim consistent with American exceptionalism, which is one of the things that book seeks to question. The US is an example, albeit an important example, for the argument about the logic of foreign policy (in all its forms) rather than its exemplar. It would have been possible to write about other countries using the theoretical approach in *Writing Security*. Indeed, the first seeds of that book's argument are to be found in my undergraduate dissertation where I wrote about the domestic sources of foreign policy in Australia and New Zealand as a way of explaining the differences in nuclear policy of each country. By the time the argument had developed into *Writing Security*, which was another step beyond what I wrote in my doctoral dissertation, I had gone well beyond the idea of "domestic sources". But that at least shows it is an argument that exceeds the US itself.

How do you think the United States' identity has been re-shaped by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic?

To be honest, I've not really thought about that question, and have not done any research on that issue. I would say, though, that responses to the COVID-19 pandemic are among the drivers that have disturbed me as part of the rise of identity issues over epistemic approaches in the last few years. The politicization of a global public health issue along partisan lines is deeply disturbing and goes well beyond the US. That public health policy in countries like the UK could end up being determined by right-wing backbenchers claiming necessary and temporary restrictions are tantamount to the end of freedom is, to put it mildly, depressing. People have died because of these myopic ideological claims, and yet such deaths have been normalised and those who are responsible face few if any sanctions. The pandemic, though, is impervious to these political currents, and as a global crisis, will be with us for some time to come, largely because of the failure of the Global North to provide the majority world with the ability to vaccinate itself.

In a recent book chapter, you demonstrate how visual framings in the Australian media have served to dehumanise refugees and asylum seekers, and associate them with threats to sovereignty and security. What could be done to overcome this narrative in a state system that is grounded in borders and sovereignty?

This chapter was co-authored with Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison and they deserve the bulk of the credit for an excellent piece. I won't speak directly for them, but I think a lot could be done to overcome the dehumanising and securitisation narratives vis-à-vis refugees, and what can be done is not in principle constrained by borders and sovereignty. Borders and sovereignty are only ethical limits on hospitality if we draw them in an exclusionary, tight, manner. But it is possible to imagine borders and sovereignty conceived of in a way that allows for a generous and humanitarian response. That happens practically too, as we have witnessed recently with the EU's openness to those fleeing the war in Ukraine. The fact that Ukrainians could catch a free train to Berlin and be housed quickly with German citizens – without any need for applications or visas – while those trying to get to London were caught up in a tangled web of bureaucratic malevolence, demonstrates perfectly that it is the political choices of governments, rather than the fact of borders and sovereignty, which determines how refugees are treated.

What do you think prompted the recent 'visual turn' in International Relations?

We should be sceptical of all talk of 'turns' in academia. Theorising doesn't follow a singular narrative that turns this way or that way depending on new agendas. Hopefully what is happening is that more and more layers, more and

more topics, are being added to the larger research agenda. Nor have people only recently discovered the visual, and neither do we live in a uniquely visual age. Yes, media infrastructures, and the way we produce and consume visual media, has changed significantly in the last 25 years, and we're only beginning to come to terms with that. Perhaps those changes were the prompt for this so-called turn.

But the good work that is being done is not turning the whole field. When analytical philosophers spoke of a "linguistic turn" in the 1950s, it wasn't as though language had previously been unimportant or that everyone was going to adopt their perspectives. It was that there were new approaches to language in philosophy, approaches which many of us are in some way indebted to and still building on. And that is what I hope is being signified by a so-called "visual turn" – new approaches being layered on to others to offer different and hopefully better interpretations of political phenomena. At the same time, layering cannot be just a matter of adding new focal points to the research agenda without regard to competing theoretical assumptions. It is not the case that the more is better. This layering has to be done in a way that is theoretically consistent.

How can photography and academia complement each other in explaining and revealing the realities of international politics?

Photography is a very broad term. There are many photographies. Many of those photographies might use the same technology of visualisation, but they can have very different purposes and effects. Although "art" versus "documentary" can be a hackneyed dichotomy, there is undoubtedly something very different between the landscape photography of an Andreas Gursky or the portrait photography of an Annie Leibovitz, on one hand, and the documentary work of a Sebastião Salgado and the photojournalistic reports of a Lynsey Addario, on the other. Each of these must be judged in relation to their purpose and impact. For me, although there are important cultural issues to be discussed vis-à-vis "art" photography, it is the politics of representation in documentary and journalistic work that is of most interest. This work enacts people and places in powerful ways, and that is what I have spent a couple of decades addressing. But rather than seeing this visual work as distinct from academia, I would like to see scholars taking this visual work as a site for their own investigations, so they can purse the political through the visual. I would also like to see visual practitioners engaged more directly with scholars, and in a small way that is what I am currently doing in my current position as managing editor of VII Insider, an online platform for debate and discussion that is part of The VII Foundation.

In your own work in photography and multimedia, what prompts you to pursue one particular project over another?

It's not easy to articulate a simple rationale behind all the projects I've done, because they are inevitably a combination of desire and opportunity. The video projects *The Boarding House* and *Laygate Stories*were collaborations with long-time friend and documentary photographer Peter Fryer, and were part of a wish on both our parts to produce local stories with many dimensions. On the other hand, *Living in the Shadows* was a collaboration with photographer Sharron Lovell, whom I also taught with on a multimedia journalism program, which gave me a chance to develop some production skills while telling an explicitly political story, the vast internal migration in China. The more research-based projects – *Atrocity, Memory, Photography*; *Imaging Famine*; and *The Visual Economy of HIV/AIDS* – came from moments where my academic and visual interests intersected. Indeed,*Atrocity, Memory, Photography* and *Imaging Famine* were seminal moments in my own "visual turn".

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

I spend most of time working outside of the formal institutions of academia, so it would be presumptuous of me to advise those who are starting out on university careers and bearing a heavy burden of administration, teaching, and research. I'm worried this sounds a bit trite, but the only thing I would say to people who want to be scholars is to work hard to keep open a space amongst all the pressures for your passion. What is it that you are most curious about? What puzzles you more than anything else? What do you most want to know? Let's be honest, you might run the risk of not getting as many grants if that is your starting point for scholarship, but if you can make it work in your career, being motivated by those questions will increase the chances that your life in academia is more fulfilling.