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Interview with Dr. Brian C. Schmidt¹ Professor of Political Science at Carleton University Department of Political Science

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Stenographic Version²

Disciplinary history and revisionism in International Relations (IR)

Interview Sections:

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¹ Dr. Brian C. Schmidt is a Professor of Political Science at Carleton University. He has taught at SUNY New Paltz and the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University at Albany (SUNY). His research focuses on International Relations Theory, U.S. foreign policy, and disciplinary history. Author of *The Political Discourse of Anarchy* (1998), awarded by *Choice*.

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Presentation and Academic Career

Dr. Ricardo Villanueva (RV): Hi, good morning everyone. We are here because we have a special, very special guest today, Dr. Brian Schmidt from Carleton University. This is an interview that we are going to have for the Mexican Yearbook of Global Affairs. Professor Brian Schmidt, thank you for being here with us today. We are going to start this interview with a question by Dr. Alberto Lozano.

Dr. Alberto Lozano (AL): Thank you, Ricardo. Dr. Brian Schmidt, welcome to Mexico, welcome to Universidad del Mar, and welcome to the Mexican Yearbook of Global Affairs. Dr. Schmidt, could you please introduce yourself and share with us some of your academic background?

Dr. Brian Schmidt (BS): Yes, very happy to be here. So, I started off as a traditional Political Science undergraduate student, and then I pursued an MA in International Relations and a PhD in political theory and International Relations.

Probably my biggest influence was my advisor, Dr. John Gunnell, who was a leading historian of American Political Science; and slowly but surely, I gained an interest in how the field of International Relations developed. My dissertation was entitled *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: a Disciplinary History of International Relations*. I got my doctorate in 1995. I then spent time converting the dissertation into a book, which was published by SUNY Press in 1998 under the same title. I began my teaching career at a small Liberal Arts College in New York. Then I had the great fortune to be offered a position at the University College of Wales in Aberystwyth, which, for the work that we do, is very symbolic, because that's often credited to being the start of IR or the first Department of International Relations. I then returned to New York, and several years after that, I was able to get a job in Canada, at Carleton University, where I have spent my career.

History and Disciplinary Relevance

AL: Great, thank you. Given your intellectual interests, could you please share with us your view on the relevance or the importance of History in the discipline of International Relations, please?

BS: Yes, so even in my research, you know, there was often a very overlap between History and Political Science. The question of whether International Relations could be studied without History, or where the boundary between History and Political Science lies; my own belief and trajectory of my career is that they are very, very closely together. That it is really impossible to do International Relations without History, whether studying the discipline, studying war, studying trade. You know, I often find that when I read a History

book, I gain a lot more than reading a Political Science book, to be honest, but I think they are inseparable and some of the best Political Science combines Political Science with History.

AL: Awesome, thank you.

Myths and the First Great Debate

RV: Now, going to the so-called myths of International Relations, which you have addressed and you are a leading scholar on revisionism, what do you think about the First Great Debate? Because you've written about that, you have criticized the narrative, but it is still there. Have your views changed in all of this process you have been writing about the First Great Debate?

BS: Very good question. When I started initially investigating the history of International Relations, I really didn't know where it was going to lead to. I really was kind of naive when I started it, and my advisor, again Dr. John Gunnell, said, you know, go back to volume one, number one of some of the famous journals and just read and read and read, and see if you can get a sense of the conversation of what political scientists were talking about.

In the course of that research, I reread a lot of material, and it started to dawn on me that what I thought people said, and reading their work, were greatly different. And I was like, well, what is going on here? Luckily, fortuitously, the same year that I was getting involved with this type of work, a number of other scholars in Great Britain and the US were doing similar work. So, this critique of the First Great Debate, the critique that the field started in 1919, I certainly was writing about that, but the fact that I got confirmation from other scholars really galvanized me and made me more determined that I was on the right course, the right track. I often tell PhD students: be careful what topic you pick, because it might stay with you for life. I never thought I would be doing disciplinary history for most of my career.

But to your question: the more research and the more reading, you see that the story has multiple different layers. The first wave of revisionism was very exciting because we were all challenging a very dominant narrative of the discipline. But, you know, I have reflected, and in the course of reacting to other people's work, I have made changes in my position. So, the piece that I'm currently working on for your next book I'm calling it "Beyond Revisionism". So, people have said: OK, so it is a myth, but if we go back, is there not some truth? Are there other stories that did not surface the first time? I certainly think two themes that are animating me now: the role of race and the role of gender. And I think when you start thinking in those terms, it complicates the story, and it is an unfinished journey, sure.

Women and Gender in the History of IR

RV: Speaking of the role of women in the history of International Relations and the history of international thought. As you know, the traditional narrative argues that feminism came until the 1980s, quite late in IR; and there has been literature by Patricia Owens and other scholars who have argued that there was a large amount of literature published by women before that, but the traditional narrative erases that. What are your thoughts about the role of women in the early stages of International Relations?

BS: Well, I would say, you know, there are definitely lacunas in my work, things I did not cover. And I think, at this stage we are on now, that the idea that one person can write a comprehensive history of the discipline is an impossibility. Other scholars' work has made me reconsider and think about some of the gaps in my own work. There are many ways to do disciplinary history, and I never claimed that my way was the only way. And I think it is a function of control in the discipline, that there have been people, individuals, institutions that have tried to keep certain stories alive because it privileges them.

I think Patricia Owens' work is just incredible because she has empirically validated that women were participants in early conferences, did write articles; sometimes they were wives of prominent husbands who, we find out, did a lot of the work that was non-credited and unrecognized. So, I don't think there is one story to be told. I think there are multiple stories, and the key thing for people is to actually be conscious of what they are trying to reconstruct. There is not a global discipline that arises in the United States. There are different stories, different ways to conceptualize IR... and it is actually a good corrective, because I do remember being on a panel 10 or 15 years ago, and a feminist scholar stood up and said: Is this an all-boys club? You know, there were all men on the panel doing disciplinary history. And I said: Absolutely not! We will welcome more and more additions. So, to see Patricia Owens at the ISA in Chicago this year [2025]... I give her congratulations for what she accomplished and for filling in a big missing story.

Tendencies of revisionism

AL: Dr. Schmidt, revisionists normally look at the past, but let's look at the future for a moment. Where are the revisionist debates headed in the coming years? Do you see a clear tendency in revisionist studies?

BS: I do. Just being here at this conference and the fact that there are so many people at this University and the audience were interested in this; people are continuing to publish on this. When I started off, there really was no known subfield of disciplinary history, because everybody kind of thought they knew the story and you could learn it in five or ten minutes. Now we are learning: well no! These are very, very complicated stories. It

takes a whole entire book to look at gender. It takes a whole entire book to look at the role of race. Even now, some of us, the original revisionists, are noticing that there were gaps in our own research that need to be filled.

So, I don't really see this running out of steam. I think it is very interesting that people are doing more country-specific studies, looking at the history of the discipline in different contexts and different locations. There's a critical body of literature for people to draw on, and I think the interest is growing rather than dying. And there will be debates about how to do it. How do you do disciplinary history? Do you take context? Do you ignore context? Who do you look at? Some of the feminists have argued that looking at diaries and lecture notes are another source of material to look at. There's also the phenomenon of oral histories, so even that is more material to unearth to tell the story.

Relevance of the History of International Thought

RV: Why is the History of international thought and disciplinary history of International Relations important for IR students and scholars? Does it really matter? Because some people think this doesn't have any practical application.

BS: Well, you often hear that from 1995 all the way up to 2025. But I think those people who ask that question are missing the boat, if you will. That our ideas do have a history. That there are continuities and changes, and in order to actually understand the conversation that you are involved in today, you have to have some knowledge of where it actually came from. That certain issues have been perennial, but there's diversity in how they've been discussed.

Take interdependence as a concept. Many people are interested in interdependence as a path to peace, that globalization is super interdependence. Well, people were talking about interdependence in the late 1800s, and those ideas do have a pedigree. And I think, yes, certainly Michel Foucault and genealogy, but we could just do plain old simple genealogy, you know? The history of where these ideas came from, so that people can situate themselves where they are today, and hopefully avoid the phenomenon of reinventing the wheel. Often, some people will come up with a brand-new concept, but actually it goes far back in history and there is an evolution of that concept. And I think you just gain a much greater understanding with historical awareness.

Advice for Latin American students

RV: Well, thank you very much Dr. Brian Schmidt. Are there any other questions?

AL: Yes, there's one more, one last question, please. Dr. Schmidt, do you have any suggestions, for example, for Mexican students or Latin American students, as newcomers

to this kind of topic, who may be interested in revisionist literature and research? Could you please provide a suggestion on how to engage in this revisionist intellectual adventure?

BS: Yes. I thought some of the questions from the audience today were very, very insightful, by the students, asking a similar question. I think one advantage is that now there is a critical mass of literature for new students to read and get immersed in. It is not like starting from nowhere.

The fact that some accomplished scholars have made this their avenue of research gives a legitimacy factor that perhaps was lacking 10 or 15 years ago. Less and less do I get the question of why are you doing this? Whereas in the beginning, I got it all the time. I think it encourages students to do careful research, to not accept conventional wisdom, to challenge it, and one way to challenge it is through research. I mean, this is a research endeavour, we are not just making things up.

I think it takes courage for younger students to get involved in this and, with good mentorship, support, and encouragement, I think somebody can get involved in this field, be a part of this conversation, and be successful. The wonderful thing is that now there are a number of people in different parts of the world doing this work; so you don't have to feel so isolated, with no one to talk to. So, do your research, have the courage, and always be critical. Challenge things that people take as common sense, because it might not be.

RV: Thank you, Professor Brian Schmidt. Thank you for this enlightening conversation. We hope this interview will be useful to any scholar of International Relations interested in the disciplinary history of International Relations and to future generations as well.

AL: On behalf of the Anuario Mexicano de Asuntos Globales, the Mexican Yearbook of Global Affairs, we thank Dr. Schmidt for this interview.

BS: Thank you very much.

AL: My pleasure.

BS: Thank you.

RV: Thanks, Brian, for being here. ☺