John Measor

The *On Politics* Interview

with Clarke Ries

On Politics is reviving its dormant tradition of interviewing random political science professors at UVic on sundry topics.

Ries   *Why don't we start with you talking a little bit about your current work in the political science field? I know you specialize in Iraq, but within that what do you spend your time doing?*

Measor   My graduate and my thesis work is on the creation of modern political identities, especially in the developing world, specifically as you mentioned in the Middle East. I looked at Iraq, which had a lot of unique characteristics, especially in how their identity formation works. First of all, no one had done any work on it, which means it's a good niche for a young scholar to try and find something that other people

haven't fleshed out as much, and secondly because I was drawn to the region politically over the last decade due to sanctions, and thirdly because I think the Middle East is such an interesting part of the world — that if you can start getting political issues there you'll understand them anywhere, that there's some universals that come out of it.

Ries   *Besides or within the obvious answer of "the Iraq War," are there any particular issues or questions that you've been struggling with or thinking about?*

Measor   My own work is on identity, and that branches out into what impacts [politics], how does it move forward, how do people within various parts of the world engage with questions of modernity and political power and identity across different platforms?

I'm working on a book right now about how YouTube videos and digital telephone technology has impacted how culture within Iraq and within Palestine impacts the conflicts there and the political movements there, how they express themselves. I'm co-authoring the book with someone else who's interested in those very same questions, but from the perspective of young Americans who are fighting in Iraq. Of course both groups are generating media, but they're not really speaking with each other. I guess the people who are in favour of that technology, or its liberatory or emancipatory functions, always feel there's a universal nature to it. That may eventually become the case, but right now it's just interesting that young Americans, whether they be soldiers or contractors or people working in the Coalition Provisional Authority, were sending or expressing these thoughts back to their own families, to their own society, countering or moving around or getting around or however you want to put it, their own media's and political authorities' spin on issues.

A lot of it was positive, "what we're doing here is good, this is what we're doing," this kind of thing. And Iraqis very similarly — or Arabs or Muslims that had come to Iraq to fight or to engage in what was going on there — very similarly sending messages home, even if it's ten metres away. The factor that arises from that is it becomes an age is-

sue, so you have a real dichotomy, whether it's the Western- ers in Iraq or the Iraqis fighting the Americans, what have you, they all tend to speak to their own generation. It be- comes this levelling agent. The Iraqi videos have an ability to get out to Palestine or to Lebanon or to India or to points far beyond, and to speak to that generation. They express them- selves using clips from video games mashed with clips from their own actions, interspersing it with what they're doing and what kind of message they're trying to send; it really gives them the freedom and the ability to do it.

It's interesting; the young Americans are coming from a society where this is normal, their peers back home are doing the same thing, whether it be making YouTube videos about skiing or their own latest trouble blowing their nose. And yet here are the Iraqis, who have lived under complete media suppression, let alone censorship, and little or no access to outside media—to the technologies we're talking about–they're jumping in at the deep end and yet they're just as familiar and able to grasp the ideas and the creation of media rapidly, so it's really interesting to see the creativity they're able to bring forth and the story they want to tell.

Ries   *Have any political theories, templates, or tools proven particularly adept or dysfunctional at characterizing Middle Eastern politics? The obvious example, I suppose, would be realism. A lot of people see the invasion of Iraq as being the culmination of realist theory, and a lot of other people see its subsequent failure as being a rebut- tal of realism.*

Measor   I think that whether it be realism or another political ideol- ogy or theory, the problem isn't so much the efficacy they deliver. The problem is that with so many of these theories we're looking for explanatory usages of them, and therefore people maybe look for too much from the theory, thinking that it's just going to neatly fit all of the events that they see, instead of just explaining one piece of the puzzle to them. This is common, especially with ideologies more so than po- litical theories per se; [people] want their ideology to be an all-encompassing view that explains everything to them. Iraq once again is the perfect example of how that just

doesn't work. Of the seventy-seven catalogued and recognized reasons for the invasion put forth by the US administration, they don't all fit into a neat bundle. Whether any of them were actually the reason or not is also a very good question which I don't hope you're going to ask —

Ries   *On that note …*

Measor   [Laughs] But, in terms of the question of what the Iraq War speaks to, I think it probably speaks to any theory depending on what utility you get out of it, or how it explains things to you. Realism would be difficult of course because there isn't an Iraqi state any longer, so what is most important in the post-invasion period doesn't speak to realist principles. That being said, I think a lot of people are making a lot of hay, and it makes it difficult for someone like me, because everybody writes a book, writes an article, has an opinion these days based on presupposed notions of theory and ideology, and they try to shoehorn in Iraq, or Palestine, or any of these empirical examples or lived realities into their presupposed notions, and that can be very dangerous.

Ries   *That said, have you noticed a shift in tone of academic literature, or in the content or in the paradigms since the invasion of Iraq?*

Measor   No, but I'm probably cynical. I think a lot of people, unfortunately, tend to have their tool and they use it, and no matter how blunt an instrument it becomes after so much usage they tend not to be able to open the toolbox and use different theories and theoretical approaches to be able to understand things from different perspectives, to have a more robust understanding. They're more interested in proving a point — that their tool is the best tool. I think it's unfortunate because it can undermine those same peoples' positions. What they could have brought to the table using that tool is hurt because all the chatter around it takes away from the good points they were probably making.

Ries   *So when you see Western agents engaging with the Middle East, what kind of attitudes or education do you notice warp or change our perception of them, and vice versa?*

Measor   I think it's twofold. You have to start out with the fact that I do think generally people are still fairly ignorant, in a positive sense — it's a very harsh word, but they're ignorant of the region, they're ignorant of the people who live there. They have some pretty wild notions of what type of people live there and what informs them or how they live their lives.

That being said, I think there has been a dramatic change in the last two years, in terms of accessibility to those cultures for anyone who is willing to give it ten minutes online. There's a tremendous amount of literature from the region being translated, Arab and otherwise, increasing access — most people within the Middle East region now have some level of access to media, and an increasing ability to create media. In many ways, because new media is such a huge force in the region right now, they almost have less self-censorship than we do. At least for the present time, although this may change very quickly, a call-in show, or an internet chat room, even in English and therefore accessible to most people here, will appear dramatically more open than our own versions of the same thing. It's very common in the Middle East region, for instance, for a government minister to go on television and take direct questions uncensored or unvetted from whoever calls in. I don't think there's very many Canadian ministers who would open themselves to that level of scrutiny.

As an aside, for instance, last week the Border Protection Service spoke for the first time since the man from Poland [Robert Dziekanski] was killed [at the Vancouver airport], and they said "we'll take five questions" and there was nearly a riot in the media, so they backed down and said there was ten questions, so —

Ries   *Do you see this as a question of naiveté on the part of the Middle Eastern ministers?*

Measor   It's not naivety. It's that people haven't worked out how [the media] is going to fit within their culture as yet.

Secondly, because the day-to-day reality hasn't changed, in terms of how overwhelmingly controlled media

and society is within the region. All the states in the region are totalitarian, and very authoritarian-structured. If you're in Egypt, you could never approach a government minister and talk to him, you could never complain about the service you were getting at a government wicket or to a police officer (unless you were engaging in a bribe), you'll get beaten. You do not want to engage with the state at all on a day-to-day basis in the region. But if the government minister shows up on TV that night you can text in, and at least thus far there hasn't been retributions. It may be naive in the sense that people tend to still put their names on their text messages — so maybe when the first guy who sends a text in disappears things will change, but right now it's very fascinating how things are done.

Lastly, another thing that transforms [the media] is that it's transnational, so if al-Jazeera's broadcasting from Dubai, which is three countries away, about an Egyptian election, there's not much the Egyptian government can do to go after the program, the host, or the channel. They can ban al-Jazeera and its reporters from the country but they can't control their own population from watching it.

Ries *Speaking of media-projected realities, there's been this highly-publicized downturn in violence following the American troop surge in Iraq. Does this make you all optimistic in terms of the American presence, or Iraq's future? I know a lot of refugees are using this as an opening to return from places like Syria ...*

Measor To preface my remarks, long term I'm quite optimistic about Iraq's future, however, I think my window of what the future is might be a bit longer than what other people might have in mind. I have incredible faith in the Iraqi people and the fact they know they're Iraqis and that they know what that means — even if no one else does — and that they will be able to solve their own political problems in a fashion that will work for them. But, in the short term, in the interim, no, I can't say I'm optimistic. When we talk about violence decreasing, we're not talking about violence amongst the Iraqi population decreasing, even if it has. There's no one who can give you an answer as to that being the case or not because quite honestly no one has kept numbers, statistics, or even in

any way a general metric to be able to gauge what the level of violence is amongst the society. We can all be happy that there probably is a downturn in violence, part of which probably comes from increased amounts of troops on the streets in Baghdad. But, you have to remember that follows a two year escalation of conflict within the city itself, and that much of the violence that drove that, much of the violence that was ongoing, was an ethnic cleansing of the city. The composition of the city has now been dramatically changed, to the point where most neighbourhoods are now cantons of one group or another, and to where the city went from about forty-five to fifty percent Shia to seventy-five percent Shia. [The Shia] won that war.

So, is the downturn in violence because of American forces or is it because there's just no reason to ethnically cleanse any more — the fight's over. That's a very good question and now that the winners have to divide the spoils amongst themselves, it may lead to even further violence. I don't think without actual knowledge on the ground, which doesn't get portrayed in the media due to the level of violence (the media's not hiding anything, they just can't get there themselves), it's very difficult to answer those sort of questions.

Ries *One of the things about Iraq, given the level of investment on the part of the United States, it's turning into a reference on foreign intervention for a long time to come in terms of "should we, shouldn't we." When you look at the death toll in Iraq, which at this point has pushed itself up, by the latest estimate to approximately 1.2 million, do you consider this to be emblematic of the new nature of small wars? In terms of the casualty rates and the cost in terms of human life, is this something we should expect if we want to go into Darfur, or if we want to become engaged in a future conflict overseas?*

Measor I have no doubt that what's happened in Iraq will inform that discussion immensely from here on out, and that will have both predictable and unpredictable consequences.

However, I don't think Iraq actually was a humanitarian intervention operation. I referred earlier to the seventy-seven reasons that were given for US intervention by

the Bush administration, and that certainly was one of them. However, I don't think very many people actually thought that it was a situation where humanitarian intervention was warranted. If you believe in the cause of the invasion, I think that out of the seventy-seven it might have been the seventy-seventh best reason. It just wasn't part of that discussion, and for that reason, for people that favour humanitarian intervention and the promotion of the Right to Protect and other things that the Canadian government and the United Nations support, Iraq will become a quite large albatross around your argumentation and your ability to get your point out.

Personally I'm not a fan of intervention and I think it's problematic for many of the reasons that perhaps Iraq might bring forward, but that again I can only stress that I don't think it was a humanitarian intervention, so it's not helpful—

Ries   *Apples and oranges?*

Measor   Yeah. Iraq was a full-fledged conflict between two states, and one state won. The problem in Iraq was not with the war phase; the execution of the military operation in Iraq was seamless and was actually carried out with very little bloodshed for what it was. The problem of Iraq was the post-invasion period, the last five years we've all had to live through, Iraqis more so than anyone else. That phase I think puts truth to the lies not of your question, but of the implication within your question, which is that it was a humanitarian operation. If it was a humanitarian operation you would have been prepared with field hospitals and food and all kinds of security. I mean, any kind of discussion about Right to Protect and humanitarian intervention, whether it be Sierra Leone or Darfur, any contingency planning for Darfur, the vast majority of the forces that would be going in would be police and not military. That was just not part of the equation in Iraq, and therefore you can either argue that they weren't prepared, and there's a lot of arguments for that, or you could say that that just wasn't what they were there to do, and therefore it wasn't a humanitarian intervention, that it wasn't the goal from the beginning.

Ries   *Would you consider Afghanistan to be more relevant?*

Measor   The downside with a lot of these analogies or with using
                analogies to begin with is that each of them will of course
                always have their own particular peculiarities, in terms of
                the background of the country in question. For instance Af-
                ghanistan is… I don't like to use the term "failed state," but
                Afghanistan basically just hasn't been a state for over three
                decades, and therefore in many ways, whether you believe
                in the nation state model or not, the objective of humanitar-
                ian intervention in Afghanistan is solely premised behind
                building a state from scratch. That is not how the mission
                was described to Canadians, it was not how the mission was
                described to anybody, but it is the mission and it's a very
                difficult one. Iraq is completely different, because Iraq had a
                functioning and successful, centralized, well-staffed, and
                well-equipped state — until that state was consciously and
                by choice taken apart by military action.

Ries   *So, post-US presence, because that's obviously coming up at some
                point in the next few years, what sort of structure do you see com-
                ing in terms of the new state structure of Iraq, because there are
                several examples of possible paths in the region. You have Lebanon,
                and Lebanese political cantonization, and you have Somalia, where
                there's actually several functioning states within the larger, non-
                functioning de jure state. Which direction do you see Iraq going?*

Measor   The choice in Iraq is the choice that's always been there for
                Iraq as a contiguous territory, to become a polity; which is
                that they have to decide whether it's going to be centralized
                or decentralized. I think there's widespread support within
                Iraq for a decentralized state, and obviously there are certain
                political forces which are dead-set against that, but I think
                long-term a decentralized state model will emerge which
                will be very Iraqi in its scope and in its notions.
                    I think the problems up until this point are that first,
                those decentralized models that have been proposed and in-
                deed, imposed on the country in terms of its constitution,
                have been written by outsiders. This when there are Iraqis
                perfectly capable of writing their own constitution, and per-

haps not even any need to write a new constitution, that it's not so much a constitutional problem as it is political. So, the first factor was that the model that was proposed came from the outside and therefore everyone's going to oppose it simply because it's not an internal decision.

Second, any of the various models that get adopted by various political actors immediately get tainted by much the same problem. For instance, the confederal model which has been largely adopted in the new constitution. In an interview I did with Barham Salah, who was the prime minister of Kurdistan and a senior leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, and who is now a minister of the interior in Iraq, as he put it to me, he said "the biggest mistake we made was we didn't sell 'federalism,' we allowed — especially Arabs — to always see it as 'Kurdish federalism.'" In reality [federalism] solves many of the problems, because if you sit down and just read the constitution to most Iraqis right now, they would agree with what it's saying and not have trouble with it, but if you couch it in the way it's discussed on the streets, it has taken on sectarian and ethnic identities, which will always undermine it. It has to be seen as a consensus among the various groups, not as a divide.

The reason why it might actually be easier than in a place like Lebanon, is that whatever level of sectarian and ethnic enmity there is within the country, even if it's as advanced as many of us hope it isn't, those identities and those notions aren't congealed to the point where you have to negotiate between groups, you can negotiate across groups and you can appeal to Iraqi nationalism, whereas you can't do that in a place like Lebanon. Every group says they're working towards Lebanon and for Lebanon, but in reality they're working for their particular group. I don't think [Iraqis] have reached that stage yet. They may, but we hope it doesn't.

Ries   *So in terms of both Iraq's internal politics and the politics of the region as a whole, the United Nations announced in June that there were approximately 4.2 million Iraqi refugees. How would you expect those refugees to affect both the recovery of Iraq as a state and the stability of the region as a whole?*

Measor   I think this is one of the two or three biggest questions cur-
rently facing the region. The other two being — the one you
asked — what will be the future political decisions of Iraqis
on how to run their country, and secondly the potential for
the expansion of the hostilities as they exist right now to
spread throughout the region.

The refugees are a third important issue, and I think
it should be pointed out that this is a massive number of
people. In Iraq, this is a country of roughly thirty million
people, about five million Iraqis were outside Iraq prior to
the American invasion. Now, most left due to the regime,
people that opposed Saddam or didn't want to live under
the regime. Many left during the Iran-Iraq War, because they
just didn't want to live in any society that's conflict-ridden
(not internally, but meaning they didn't want to fight in a
disastrous war). Most of the intelligentsia had to leave due
to political reasons. So there was this massive number al-
ready outside. Post 2002-2003, it's as high as 20,000 people a
month into Syria alone, you're looking at about 1.5 million
Iraqis in Syria, about a million of those in Damascus alone,
and now twenty per cent of the population of Damascus is
Iraqi. You have about 300,000 to half a million in Jordan, and
you have another million spread throughout the Gulf.

Those patterns have less to do with ethnic composi-
tion but rather with economic means. If they have money
they end up in the Gulf, if they had a middle class income
they're more likely to end up in Jordan because they can buy
property and build a house and try and start a new life. Of
all these Iraqis, I've never met any who don't want to return
home.

So to answer your question, they will prove im-
mensely destabilizing simply because countries like Syria
especially, but even Jordan for that matter, aren't getting any
support in terms of dealing with this massive wave of refu-
gees — the largest the region has seen since 1948, with the
Palestinians. The longer this goes on, the more of a problem
it will be, because these groups will start to organize. Refu-
gee camps will be set up, political parties and political fac-
tions will form amongst them, and those groups will increas-
ingly demand autonomy and control, both within the socie-

ties they're in and back into Iraqi politics, so it could be an immense problem.

The last thing I'd say about the refugees is that, and there's no empirical evidence to back it up, but I think it logically makes sense, that I think a lot of the people that are in these groups would be the Iraqis that are probably most needed in terms of tolerance back in Iraq proper. This is because most of the people that have left haven't left simply because of the violence or simply because of socioeconomic reasons, a lot of them are intermixed couples, intermarriages between Sunni and Shia, Kurd and Arab, et cetera, and so it's very difficult for them to fit into any kind of homogenized neighbourhood. They may have crossed the border to live for up to a year, but rapidly their funds run out, it's difficult to integrate into a new society, and of course they just want to go home. They want to go back to the Iraq they knew, and whether that Iraq still exists is a big unknowable.

Ries   *In terms of the greater region now, there's [The Annapolis Israel/Palestine Peace Conference] coming up, and it's widely expected to be a failure. If it is, what should we expect the aftermath to look like? Who wins, who loses, what changes?*

Measor   This again is a big discussion within North American policy circles. The argument leading into the Iraq war, one of the seventy-seven reasons, was that peace in Palestine would come through the streets of Baghdad — that by changing the regime in Baghdad you would somehow be able to impact the Palestinian issue. Now of course that's been turned around 180 degrees, "let's create peaceful conditions in Palestine to placate Iraqis."

To be honest with you, I think that's completely misplaced, in the sense that if you solve the Palestinian question today, miraculously and for good reason, I don't think it would change one iota the dynamics or the issues on the ground for Iraqis and the various Iraqi political groups. They're arguing for their own society, they're not terribly concerned with or tied up into Palestine.

But, increasingly and because of the role of the Americans themselves and the transnational nature of many of the political movements involved, Lebanon, Palestine and

Iraq are increasingly entwined with each other, so it's getting to be a big ball of yarn that's getting to be very difficult to break apart if you're trying to move that ball forward, to mix metaphors. The three conflicts will have to be solved within their local situations, they cannot be solved on a regional level. As much as it's important to keep regional actors out as force magnifiers and as people feeding some of these conflicts; nonetheless, it has to be locals who make the decisions about their own political futures.

Ries   *Let's talk about another situation that has the potential to be more than local, which is Iranian nuclear technology. What changes would you expect in the power structure of the Middle East due to their pursuit of, if not weapons, than the capability of weapons?*

Measor   I'm thinking these questions aren't the ones you asked Rob [R.B.J. Walker] last year. [See the Spring 2006 issue of *On Politics.*]

Ries   *[Laughs] I have no idea what they asked Rob last year.*

Measor   I thought you'd be asking questions like [mimics shrill undergrad student], "What about grad school?"

Ries   *[Laughs] Yeah right.*

Measor   Let me see, the impact of Iranian nuclear technology. Well, again, the local factors drive a lot of the Iranian position. I think it's grossly misunderstood even by many analysts that Iranian nuclear technology was not something that was developed under the Islamic Republic, it was something that pre-existed the revolution in 1978-79. It's very much seen, as many things are in Iranian politics, as a nationalist question. It's a matter of people wanting to have access to, and the capability of developing this technology indigenously, so that they have control over that level of technological advance. Considering Iran has been virtually isolated for about the last thirty years, especially from American technology and many Western technologies due to American sanctions, the indigenous capacity to do something like enrich uranium to

that level has implications far beyond nuclear technology, let alone weaponization.

I think that's often missing from the discussion. If Iran wants to develop cancer treatments, if Iran wants to do a host of other things the basic science required is related. If you want to develop a centrifuge to enrich uranium it means you have to have certain metallurgical skills, you have to be able to machine tools to a certain level, you have to have computer technology to a certain level, you have to be able to write the code and the software for that computer technology, there's ripples through such a government program that go far beyond nuclear technology. I think that though maybe in the way I've just put it, most average Iranians wouldn't put it that way, they nonetheless are very much in favour of nuclear technology, because they do realize the spill-over benefits, and the simple pride that comes from the fact that they can reach the pinnacle of science. There's not much more out there in terms of what any country can do to establish itself as being out in the forefront scientifically, maybe put a satellite in space, develop nuclear technology and perhaps some biochemical things that many in the public wouldn't be able to recognize.

These kind of things are what's really driving Iran's nuclear program. As for weaponization, I'm sure there are many in Iran that are interested in weaponization, and therefore it would be a factor in the decision-making, but it is not what's driving it.

That doesn't mean that you necessarily have to trust the Iranians or think that they're nice guys, it just means that you have to understand that if you want to take away that capability from them — now that they're on the cusp of it or have reached it, depending on who you talk to — that it's a lot for them to give up without getting something in return. If you merely end economic blockades and normalize relations and give them access to modern medical technology and economic development and all these kind of things, then it takes away a lot of the drive to be able to do this as a technology and probably placates a lot of their fears — as much as your own.

However, the second aspect of it is nuclear technology proliferation, especially in terms of weaponization

within the region. This is something which I think will be virtually unstoppable no matter what happens in Iran. I think that we have to understand that it's as simple as where you put your feet down to get a perspective of the world. There's nobody that doubts that Israel is a nuclear power, Pakistan is a nuclear power, Russia is a nuclear power, and so from virtually any international relations paradigm, it's rational behaviour for them to want to pursue these technologies as a deterrent in an increasingly fractious situation in the region. If Iran gets nuclear technology and especially if they're able to weaponize it, there's no doubt that Saudi Arabia and probably Egypt as well will openly go for nuclear technology. It's very much an issue — one that drove and informed the issue of Iraq over the last 15 years—which I think will bring all of us, if we're honest about it, to some pretty hard decisions. Iraqis as a society in the 1990s died in the hundreds of thousands due to economic sanctions placed on their country simply because we wouldn't (we being the Western civilized world) allow a certain regime to have access to these technologies. It had very little to do with weaponization, because it's easy to say you don't want a state like Iran or Iraq to achieve nuclear weapons and the delivery mechanisms they need to deliver those weapons efficiently. It's another thing to do what happened in Iraq in the 1990s, which is to say that high schools couldn't have chemistry textbooks and universities couldn't have lab equipment. It gets into the duplicitous nature of modern technology and science. Anything can lead to weaponization, and if we're going to say that countries like Iran and Iraq are not allowed those technologies simply because we don't trust them, there is no way that they will engage with us as equal partners, because we are relegating them to an undeveloped status, something to which I don't think anybody thinks they should be kept to.

Thanks to John Measor for taking the time to speak with On Politics.