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Revisiting Responsibility in International Relations: Canadian Foreign Policy

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From the 1990s through the early 2000s, *responsibility* was a popular area of inquiry in International Relations. In this same era, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine was developed and cultivated in the international system, and heavily researched in the academic realm. As a result, there is a sizable body of literature on responsibility and its relationship to humanitarian intervention, post-conflict reconstruction, the UN Security Council, sovereignty, and the feasibility of R2P implementation (for the latter, see Paris, 2014). Further, there is a significant amount of writing from the same era, stemming from political theory, which investigates 'responsibility' as a concept for states and international institutions, building on theories of morality and justice, including those of Iris Marion Young and Martha Nussbaum. (Erskine, 2003; Miller, 2001; Murphy, 2006).

On the other hand, in the last decade, research on responsibility has been much scarcer in International Relations (IR). Further, the international context has changed drastically, and as such, the use of the term seems loose and incoherent at first glance. As a result of this, and its previous popularity, responsibility – particularly in the context of R2P – has been subject to harsh criticisms across the discipline. In addition, responsibility has been researched more thoroughly in international law, with regards to where responsibility 'fits' within different levels and jurisdictions (Kolb, 2017), but much use of responsibility as a term in global governance falls outside the realm of law and within the realm of policy (i.e. the Sustainable Development Goals). Given this, it is necessary to revisit responsibility in order to understand how states actually engage with and deliver on the term through policy. Bexell and Jonsson, in their work on responsibility and the SDGs, describe the use of responsibility as 'a key organising term in policy circles in global governance settings' (Bexell and Jonsson, 2017, p. 14). As responsibility diffuses further into states' foreign policies, multilateral organizations, and international agreements, and begins to appear outside of simply conversations on R2P and/or a state's responsibility to its citizens, it is necessary to understand it beyond older arguments of responsibility as morality, as justice, or as a norm.

The puzzle at hand then is not a question of what a just or moral responsibility is, but rather how responsibility is actually practiced by states in the international system. Regardless of academic understandings of moral or just responsibility, states debate and explicitly use the term in major international discourse, not just in R2P, but in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the United Nations Global Compact, and more. Trends in the practices of 'doing responsibility' have not been comprehensively traced and I am interested not in a normative or discursive tracing, but rather one that reflects what states *do* in practice, in response to its use as a 'key organizing term' that enables policy and action. I am specifically interested in how responsibility is practiced to create (or fail to create) global policy change.

This has implications for Canada, a state that has been deeply influential, for better or for worse, in discussions of responsibility in humanitarian intervention. This is because of its interest in responsibility broadly, as well as its current plans to be a leader in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) achievement, through its new Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP). This article will propose a framework-in-progress for understanding responsibility as practice and provide examples and implications for Canadian foreign policy and Canadian work on the SDGs.

Responsibility, as an abstract discussion of what is moral or what is just, is primarily a discursive and philosophical concept. While this research is valuable, it only provides the prescriptive part of the picture, in terms of its optimal purpose and idealized call to action in international agreements, documents, and doctrines. So, while responsibility is arguably a call to morality or justice, this does not tell the whole story because it lacks a discussion of whether, in response, states behave morally or to standards of justice, how, to what extent, and why or why not.

Responsibility is also not a norm as norms are understood within IR (for definitions of norms, see Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). It is too vague, as it does not explain which actors are obligated to respond, what action(s) they are to take, how they are to take them, and under what conditions they are to do so. Indeed, the answers to each of these questions are different across different issue areas. For example, 'responsibility' in terms of climate change is different in both its intention and outcome than 'responsibility' in terms of global poverty, which is again different from 'responsibility' of states to intervene in a conflict. The vagueness of the term means the coherent generalization across trends in the practice(s) of responsibility that would be required of a norm remains elusive.

If norms have limited use, and philosophical and prescriptive analyses do not tell the whole story, how are we to understand responsibility in terms of its practices by states? To return to Bexell and Jonsson and their research on the SDGs, they break down three ways of understanding responsibility: responsibility as cause, and most importantly for this research, responsibility as obligation, and responsibility as accountability (Bexell and Jonsson, 2017, pp. 16–17). Responsibility as obligation is forward-looking and involves a duty to act or follow through on commitments made. Responsibility as accountability is backward-looking and requires answering for how obligations were fulfilled (Bexell and Jonsson, 2017, pp. 17–18). They argue that the predominant sense of responsibility in relation to the SDGs is of obligation. For example, sustainable debt levels are declared the responsibility of borrower countries in economic development, but lenders also bear responsibility to lend without undermining a borrower country (Bexell and Jonsson, 2017, p. 19). However, responsibility as obligation is not exclusive; accountability is also present, though it requires data and analysis of results as a measure of progress and to see whether a state has met its obligation and fulfilled its responsibility (Bexell and Jonsson, 2017, p. 23).

The clear trend here is that both responsibility as obligation and responsibility as accountability are representations of practice. They both describe what states or multilateral policy-making institutions (i.e. UN organizations, development banks) *do* in response to being rendered responsible, though not explicitly so. By digging deeper into how states practice responsibility, through delivery and results of policy, both obligation and accountability can provide explanatory power on what responsibility actually means in the international system.

By seeing responsibility as practice, it can be understood in a much more dynamic and active way, as a sociological phenomenon, rather than only a political one. This is not to say that it is apolitical, but rather, in Ole Waever's terms, to say that from a theoretical perspective, analyzing the politics of a phenomenon serves a different purpose from analyzing the sociology and organizational behaviour of a phenomenon (Waever, 2015, p. 126). Both provide valuable theoretical insights to IR, but a sociological theory simply has different empirical needs, which are in this case, practices. Understood this way, morality and justice are theories of 'the politics of responsibility', which go hand-in-hand with a different *sociological* understanding of responsibility which is my focus here. Upon empirically and systematically tracing obligation and accountability as practices of responsibility, it will be possible to evaluate what we know about how states *do* responsibility within the context of theoretical meditations on 'what is just' and 'what is moral' for state behaviour.

Thinking about how states practice responsibility requires theorizing about what practice itself is. A theory of international practices centres the everyday practices of sub-unit level actors (diplomats, leaders, bureaucrats, civil society actors) as the object of inquiry and the glue that holds the 'international' together (Bueger and Gadinger, 2015). Practices are, 'socially meaningful patterns of action, which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world' (Adler and Pouliot, 2011, p. 4). They are procedural, in that they are the dynamic and ideational processes that either maintain or change structures and allow agents to reproduce or make changes to these structures (Adler and Pouliot, 2011, p. 5).

Responsibility as practice conceptualizes discourse and practice as co-constitutive, and with discourse as a component of practice, can illustrate what discourse alone cannot. It also extends the temporal understanding of responsibility to be not just a promise or a statement, but rather one that can be measured over time and requires repeated actions, in terms of implementation, results, changes in behaviour, and changes in knowledge and ideas. Engaging and implementing responsibility is an exercise of politics, power, financial investment, and application of human resources and knowledge. It allows us to look at what we expect from obligation and what we see from accountability. Empirically, this means that to study responsibility is to study bureaucratic structures and policy actions that enact, implement, and evaluate the work stemming from statements of responsibility.

Recently, Canada launched its FIAP, which featured, among many priorities, a focus on the SDGs, which are built on responsibility. For example, with the SDGs, the UN states that 'countries are expected to take ownership and establish a national framework for achieving the 17 Goals' and they have 'primary responsibility' for implementation and tracking of progress ('The Sustainable Development Agenda'). As a result, studying what we mean when we talk about responsibility in global governance has direct implications for scholarly assessment of the new Canadian policy. For example, the Policy's action areas are specifically built on the SDGs, with SDG 5 being a central focus that guides the entire approach. The Policy reads:

'Sustainable Development Goal 5—achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls—is the entry point for Canada's international assistance and will drive progress in the other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We believe that the best way to reduce poverty and leave no one behind is through a feminist international assistance policy. We are committed to helping to achieve the SDGs in Canada and in developing countries. Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will be at the heart of Canada's approach to implementing the SDGs.' ('Canada's feminist international assistance policy,' 2017)

With responsibility-laden documents shaping state foreign policy, as seen above, studying the practical structures of how states such as Canada (and the FIAP) fulfill (or do not fulfill) their responsibilities, can be done by examining the following practice-related questions:

- Do states have policy documents outlining how they will undertake their SDG-related responsibilities? What were the patterns of consultations, and with whom, in order to develop these documents?
- Do they have clear priorities, mandates, and objectives for fulfilling their agreed upon responsibilities under the SDGs?
- Are they focused on coherence of policy around the SDGs?
- Do they have policy shops and adequately funded programs for each of the 17 Goals?
- Do they have comprehensive and transparent monitoring and evaluation programs?
- Do they have constructive and well-funded partnerships with civil society organizations and NGOs that are working to support the SDGs? How do those relationships operate?
- Do they have thought leadership and adequate expertise, through internal expertise and access to external experts? What is the value placed on expertise?
- Is implementation of SDG-related policy supported by well-qualified staff and leadership? How do they interact with one another?
- What are the policy and communication tools being used for implementation and accountability?
- What are the basic procedures and professional norms that employees use every day in their work towards delivering on the SDGs?
- How do the implementing actors operate under global norms or norms within international organizations?

Assessing Canada's practices with regards to implementing the FIAP and supporting the SDGs can serve as a case study for how one state, Canada, envisions and undertakes 'responsibility' as it is expressed by organizations like the UN. It can illuminate how responsibility, particularly in international development and climate change policy, is operated and performed by Canadian policy makers, their partners in multilateral organizations, and their partners in civil society, and when compared and contrasted with case studies of other states' relationships to responsibility, may demonstrate multiple trends across responsibility in IR.

Responsibility, when understood as practice, can also serve to illustrate trends in Canadian foreign policy, as Canada strives to be a leader on responsibility-related initiatives and has been deeply involved in past ones. It can demonstrate where Canadian priorities really are by moving beyond just rhetoric and myths of Canadian foreign policy to see where the money, the expertise, and the resources go in practice. It can also demonstrate how Canada envisions and fulfills its responsibilities to its partners, its like-minded donor countries and allies, international organizations, and what it deems the most important goal of international assistance – supporting the poorest and the most vulnerable ('Canada's feminist international assistance policy,' 2017).

Ultimately, there is significant interplay between the role of responsibility as conceptualized through a morality- or justice-based lens, and the role of responsibility as practice in shaping state behaviours. This is similarly reflected in Sheryl Lightfoot's work on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, where she notes that states may endorse a rights regime, but committing to it can be a grey zone of practice and moral action that is less binary than when understood simply by endorsement/non-endorsement (Lightfoot, 2012). The SDGs are only one example, and Canada is only one state, but developing a framework that can be applied to Canadian foreign policy is both useful for theoretical implications of responsibility in global governance, as well as evaluating the new Canadian FIAP as academics. Further questions and cases may include 'responsibility to whom', particularly in the context of feminist international assistance, as there are important debates to be had about where international assistance goes, how participatory and empowering the process is, whether women are leaders in the processes, what defines 'feminist foreign policy', the distribution and relationships of patriarchal/colonial/racial power, and how deeply feminism, as led by activists, academics, and civil society practitioners, is implemented into Canadian programming, policy, and spending. Many of these questions and valid critiques by feminist and post-colonial scholars of IR speak to or could benefit from a study of responsibility as practice, especially as each of these schools of thought deeply influence each other's approaches to methodology and research (see Rigney, 1999).

Further, looking outside the scope of 'traditional IR' opens questions of responsibility regarding the intersections of the international and domestic spheres. Looking at questions of Indigeneity is especially instructive here and, as Hayden King argues, Canada is a settler colonial state and Canadian foreign policy must be seen through this lens. In this way, Indigeneity is eliminated as a legitimate matter of concern in Canadian foreign policy, as it is presented as a domestic problem since states make up the core of 'the international' (King, 2017). Indeed, while Canada is seen to support the SDGs through international assistance, at the 'domestic' level Canada is failing to practice its own responsibilities when the focus is turned to its treatment of Indigenous peoples. While this is a much larger question than can be taken up here, it problematizes Canada's relationship to 'the international' and its dedication to the SDGs and feminism in its foreign policy. It changes the practical nature of the IR questions, 'which actors are responsible' and 'responsible to whom', and can be brought in to larger questions of using practice to understand responsibility in foreign policy.

While many traditional international relations theories may argue that states have no responsibility to anyone but their own existence, states continue to use 'responsibility' as a term in their foreign policies, major platforms, and their collaborations with other states in the international system. Responsibility also reflects a complex series of relationships between states, citizens, non-state actors, organizations, the domestic, and the international. States respond, through actions or lack of actions shaped by deliberate practices, to these uses of responsibility. As a result, there is insight to be gathered about individual states' foreign policies and responsibility as a trend across organizations and global governance. There is also insight to be gained about the value of studying practices in International Relations. This is an opportunity to better understand both a theoretical framework and an empirical trend, and both can symbiotically inform the other. Ultimately, in the case of the SDGs, it is something that affects the lives of billions of people, as subjects of global governance and policies like Canada's FIAP. Responsibility is not only an important topic to be considering in practice theory, sociology in IR, and IR more broadly, but also something to deeply consider in critiques and studies of Canada's FIAP and Canadian foreign policy in the coming years.

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