Reflective Statement

This past fall I completed POL412H1: Human Rights and International Relations, the culminating assignment for which was to write a research paper addressing a significant debate in the field of human rights.

In selecting a topic, I consulted prominent international relations blogs including Duck of Minerva, Open Democracy, Regarding Rights and Justice in Conflict to ensure that the debate I was addressing was both current and robust, in that there were credible supporters arguing both sides. Settling on the debate surrounding the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, I set out to familiarize myself with the topic.

To further familiarize myself with the doctrine and criticisms of it, I began by consulting general literature such as R2P research centre reports. Encountering the various positions allowed me to refine my research question to R2P’s legitimacy and applicability. Also informed by this pre-reading, I chose to concede the criticism of R2P’s politicization rather than counter it directly, and to argue that normative power was more significant. This decision shaped the direction of my research.

As part of the course, I attended a presentation by Judith Logan, Political Science Liaison Librarian. Using the techniques presented, I compiled a list of potential sources. I searched the library catalogue using controlled vocabulary and practiced truncation techniques so as not to exclude any relevant results. I employed flexibility and creativity in my search vocabulary using “OR” in search fields to ensure I was exhausting all relevant variations. I used quotations to search for exact phrases such as “Responsibility to Protect”, and parentheses to control my results as required.

Examples of search fields included:

- Norm* AND (circulation OR adoption OR development OR circuit OR cycle)
- “Responsibility to Protect” OR R2P OR RtoP OR “humanitarian intervention”
- (R2P OR RtoP OR “human rights” OR “Responsibility to Protect” OR “humanitarian intervention”) AND norm* AND (adoption OR circulation OR adoption OR development OR circuit OR cycle)
- (R2P OR RtoP OR “Responsibility to Protect”) AND norm*
- (R2P OR RtoP OR “Responsibility to Protect”) AND Liby*

I also searched using the Stanford Custom NGO search engine and the Union of International Association IGO search engine, as well as the Worldwide Political Science Abstracts database. Additionally, I consulted with the Director of Undergraduate Research at the Canadian Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, who provided me with the names of key scholars in the field. At this stage, I was simply compiling a general list of potential sources, and primarily relying on the abstracts of the papers to give me an indication of their relevance. I tracked all consulted sources, noting the title, author, and date of publication, as well as the main arguments. I retrieved printed
works from the stacks, going through the table of contents for each and flagging relevant chapters. Additionally, I submitted an intercampus loan request.

With these potential sources compiled, I categorized them into two broad categories of those in support of and those against R2P’s legitimacy. Having read the abstracts and performed background research, I was able to narrow the scope of my essay to three key criticisms of R2P. This allowed me to be more selective in which of my sources to retain, as some were no longer strictly relevant to my research question. I then began to further refine the sources I had collected. In evaluating the quality of sources, I considered the authority of the author, as well as the relevance of the source. I only included sources by reputable professors, well-regarded commentators, and respected policy advisors, remaining mindful of potential political or ideological biases. This was particularly important when consulting blogs, which are not peer-reviewed and can be easily published by anyone. To ensure blogs were reliable, I only included those written by qualified commentators and those posted by reputable organizations, such as the Council on Foreign Relations.

Additionally, I used Google Scholar to determine how widely sources were cited, in order to ascertain their prominence and legitimacy. This process allowed me to identify key works and authors. To this end, I also looked into key members of various R2P research centres. This strategy led me to Professor Alex Bellamy, Director of the Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, who has written extensively on the subject.

The debate format of the assignment made it imperative that I offer a comprehensive account of the subject, including sources that varied in both format and perspective. My final paper referenced a range of political commentary in the form of blogs and op-eds, as well as academic scholarship and historical accounts. I also included primary sources such as UN resolutions.

Given the arguably western origins of the R2P doctrine, my paper consciously incorporated various cultural perspectives. I presented a balanced account, drawing from non-western scholars such as Professor Amitav Acharya who has written extensively about non-western conceptions of international relations, in addition to R2P experts such as Gareth Evans who was involved in the conception of the R2P doctrine. The publication dates of my sources ranged from around the time of R2P’s inception to 2015 in order to account for the evolution of R2P. Having refined to only credible sources, I prepared detailed research notes on each, which I later used to write my essay. I faced a roadblock finding concurring reputable sources arguing that R2P caused worse human rights outcomes. To overcome this, I carefully consulted the works I had flagged as supporting R2P to see if they directly cited their opponents. This tactic proved successful.

The debate surrounding R2P is a long-standing one. I attempted to refresh the debate by drawing from recent cases of R2P invocation, and by bringing various perspectives and norm theorists into conversation in a manner that allowed me to synthesize their ideas into original insights, while countering prevalent criticisms. By situating these criticisms within a broader conceptual argument about norm internalization, I was able to draw conclusions that appropriately supported my argument. This was a rigorous, but rewarding research process.

Thank you for your consideration.