
Whither My Argument? A Reply to Jackson and Nexon

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Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel Nexon have provided a thoughtful commentary on my article “Whence American Internationalism” (hereafter, WAI). I appreciate their effort to point out agreement with some of the main aims of my essay: the importance of the collective ideation problem, the endogenous role of collective ideas in their own transformation, and the significance of collective ideas for variations in U.S. foreign policy in the past century. Given that many international relations scholars would take issue with almost all of the above, it might seem almost petty to answer the critique that Jackson and Nexon do make. Still, the issues are broad enough, and their particular comments on my piece pointed enough, that a brief response is in order.

To lead with my conclusion, while many of their criticisms are insightful and cutting for some arguments, they are a poor fit for the argument in WAI. Jackson and Nexon contend that my approach is functionalist, a “near” tautology, and lacking in causal mechanisms. In contrast, I contend that the argument in WAI is structural, generalizable (but not a tautology), and, while it gives short shrift to the causal mechanisms of their preferred “relationalist” approach, it does indeed have its own causal mechanisms. Overall the approach Jackson and Nexon champion does have potential, but at least in the abbreviated form they have had to present here, it lacks any a priori propositions about when to expect change versus continuity in collective ideas. Applied to the development of American ideas on foreign policy, therefore, it cannot explain the puzzling variations in the first half of the twentieth century.

I am grateful to Dale Copeland and David Waldner for their comments on this response.

Dialogue-IO

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Far-Fetched Functionalism

Jackson and Nexon contend that my argument is functionalist and therefore undermined by standard critiques of functionalism. They have essentially imposed Giddens's critique against Marx and Parsons on the analysis in WAI.¹ This, however, is an ill-fitting imposition at best. They identify functionalism with systemic approaches that explain continuity and change according to the ability of the system to fit its own needs. Thus they portray the epistemes I identify, "unilateralism" and "internationalism," as autonomous systems that operate with a mental capacity of their own, and without human agency. Their account, however, twists and spins the original argument into something unrecognizable.

The epistemes addressed in WAI are not the vast social systems of Parsons or the global economic systems of Marx. Instead they are the causal beliefs that characterize the way states (in my article the United States), consisting of individuals who guide and run them, conceptualize ways to provide for their well-being in the international arena. Such beliefs are formed by individuals, maintained by individuals, and evaluated and changed by individuals. I do not attribute "mental qualities to cultural structures."² I also do not believe that such epistemes have "needs." Epistemes do generate intersubjective expectations that are used as a benchmark of assessment and evaluation by the individuals who constitute society, and they can constrain and enable such actors. Hence the entire discussion of the conceptual approach is about the relationship between epistemes and individual action.³ And the empirical section discusses such linkages as well—for example, the relationship of ideational dynamics to the ideas and actions of specific individuals such as Wilson and Roosevelt.⁴

Epistemes do operate as a type of emergent structure that is not easily reducible to individual "subjective" notions. That contention need not invoke a dreaded image of functionalism, unless, of course, one believes that all structural approaches are functionalist. Jackson and Nexon imply such a belief in their claim that the analytical separation of agents and structures is inherently "neofunctionalist."⁵ Why that is so, however, is unclear. Their claim would also make a very large swath of social science theory functionalist. If that is true, then call my argument

1. See Giddens 1979, 111–15; and 1995, 15–19.

2. "Because there is no physical group mind, aggregate conceptual change must necessarily relate to the thinking and/or actions of individuals or subgroups." Legro 2000a, 263.

3. Legro 2000a, 262–66.

4. *Ibid.*, 270–71, 275–76.

5. Jackson and Nexon 2001, 5–6.

functionalist and then let us argue instead about which functionalist arguments work and which do not work.⁶

Generalizable, Not Tautological

More concretely, Jackson and Nexon point to two specific problems in WAI. The first is that it “operates at a level of abstraction close to a tautology.”⁷ But abstraction is not a flaw in itself. It is central to the theory-building process and useful for the sake of generalizability that aids recognition of similar dynamics across a range of disparate issue areas or phenomena. A generalizable account need not be a tautology.

Jackson and Nexon’s charge of tautology rests on the specific claim that:

by definition, there cannot be changes in “long-held” collective notions unless an orthodoxy is discredited and a new one emerges that can take its place. Arguing that an orthodoxy is likely to be discredited when events disconfirm its image of the world is to state a truism.⁸

But my argument avoids this characterization in several ways.

One important way is by showing that although there are different mechanisms that might discredit epistemes, not all these are likely to lead to change in those ideas.⁹ What they claim as a “truism” is denied by the logic of my argument. Events may contradict the expectations generated by an episteme without discrediting it. This is the case when a contradiction occurs but the results are desirable. In such a case, epistemic transformation is unlikely because individuals have little incentive to act or rethink their positions when results are acceptable. Those who might be so inclined have little reason to believe others will join them. Likewise, events may discredit a dominant orthodoxy, but, in the absence of a socially viable alternative, actors may sustain the old thinking for lack of a clear path forward. Again, discrediting does not by definition bring change.

A second way I guard against tautology is to check my argument, not only by attempting to develop independent measures of cause, effect, and the mechanisms that connect them, but also by relative assessment. If we accept the philosophical dictum that no account is ultimately falsifiable, then the appropriate measure of an

6. See here the defense of functionalism offered, for example, in Alexander 1985; Elster 1985, 28–29; or Pettit 1996.

7. Jackson and Nexon 2001, 19.

8. *Ibid.*, 13.

9. Likewise, change might also occur without discrediting—for example, through slower, smaller shifts over time. This type of transformation is not considered in my analysis.

argument is in comparing it with alternative explanations. WAI attempts to show that my argument better aligns in correlational and causal terms with continuity and change in the U.S. foreign policy episteme than do important existing explanations focusing on either state adaptation to power circumstances or internal interest group pressures.

Jackson and Nexon suggest that the argument simply “documents the process of socialization experienced by great powers in the international system”—that it merely cleans up what is indeterminate in structural realism’s adaptational logic. Assuming for a minute that their claim is true, what it suggests is that countries often, or at least in important circumstances, get extant power circumstances wrong. After all, if I am right, the United States did not adopt ideas (i.e., internationalism) suited to its power circumstances after World War I. Instead it returned to its pre-existing maxim to avoid entanglement. If, as many historians argue, that orientation allowed the Great Depression, the rise of fascist regimes, and the scale if not the origins of World War II, then we are talking about a considerable causal influence—one that affected a large chunk of twentieth-century international relations. If my explanation accounts for that kind of indeterminacy, while structural realism does not, I can live with that.

More generally, however, relative power is one of several factors (albeit an important one) that shapes what states experience and what they learn. Other factors—for example, various forms of status or social approval, dramatic loss of life, significant economic deprivation—also teach lessons in ways that might contradict prevailing power structures. After all, the shift in U.S. engagement (in 1941–42) did not align with a shift in power or recognition of a Soviet threat. Certainly the Soviet military machine that remained at the end of World War II, as well as Soviet actions at that time, had much to do with the degree of U.S. involvement in Europe that came later with the Marshall Plan. But the basic shift in American willingness to commit preceded any alterations in power or threat and thus cannot be reduced to them.

Taking these characteristics together—a non-circular conceptual framework, independent measurement, and an explanation which vis-à-vis alternatives finds solid empirical support—WAI avoids the supposed problem of tautology. Abstractness and generalizability should not be conflated with tautology.

Not Whence, but *Which* Causal Mechanisms

The second problem in WAI that Jackson and Nexon highlight is that there are “no mechanisms for explaining how actor-level processes are converted into anything more than shared beliefs” (versus collective or intersubjective beliefs) and that I use public discourse (for example, State of the Union speeches) as “an indirect

proxy for the contents of many individual heads.”¹⁰ This is a misreading in two respects.

First, the epistemes I am trying to explain are certainly collective phenomena and do not relate simply to individual or shared beliefs. One cannot get to collective change simply by adding together individuals who hold particular ideas.¹¹ Indeed, individuals may even promote collective ideas with which they do not personally agree—for example, to avoid a debilitating standoff or political/social sanction. Empirically, measures of collective ideas do not easily reflect the ideas of any individual, even those of a leader. Franklin Roosevelt, for example, promoted isolationist ideas in the 1930s even while he personally disagreed with them. Collective ideas also can differ from what some majority of individuals might think. Hence, epistemes (and how I measure them) are the focus not because they are efficient proxy for “asking everyone individually”¹² as in a public opinion poll, but because they might tell us something beyond that measure alone.¹³ For example, following World War I, there may indeed have been a majority in favor of some type of internationalist role for the United States.¹⁴ They could not agree on what type of internationalism to pursue, however, and ended up reverting to the preexisting unilateralist sentiment.¹⁵ The explanatory emphasis in WAI, therefore, is squarely on intersubjective collective beliefs and the ways they are autonomous from individual or aggregate individual notions.

In this respect, Jackson and Nexon offer a very different argument, placing emphasis ironically enough (given their claims that my argument is somehow reductionist) on individual cognitive change: “it is actors who experience dissonance and innovate to develop heterodox notions.”¹⁶ At some level this claim is true, but it is also incomplete for explaining change at the collective level. I focus on the social aspects of change rather than individual idea change because individual change is neither sufficient nor necessary for explaining the particular timing and circumstances of change in collective ideas. Even when the majority of individuals privately believe otherwise (suggesting the need for change), the extant collective orthodoxy may endure for a variety of reasons including individual ignorance of

10. Jackson and Nexon 2001, 9–10.

11. See Legro 2000a, 263; and 2000b, 420, 424.

12. Jackson and Nexon 2001, 10.

13. For the distinctions between individualistic conceptions of ideas and collective ones see Taylor 1971. Note that I do draw on public opinion polls as a secondary measure on the process of change, but not as a primary measure of the epistemes I am trying to explain.

14. Knock 1992.

15. I do not argue that “the relative paucity of influential advocates for abandonment of the unilateralist orthodoxy in World War I contributed to the lack of U.S. engagement in the interwar period.” (Jackson and Nexon 2001, 8).

16. Jackson and Nexon 2001, 14.

others' reassessment of what is proper and desirable, fear of social ostracism for challenging group beliefs, or a failure to agree on a new ideational structure. Conversely, even when individual ideas remain constant, collective outcomes may change simply based on differing aggregation mechanisms.¹⁷

Second, my argument does address the causal mechanisms that affect collective ideation, but it does so in a particular way. The starting point of WAI is that the existing literature has largely ignored the sources of change in ideas. To the extent that such explanations exist, they favor heavily contingent agentic accounts. Without negating a role for agency or even process accounts such as those favored by Jackson and Nexon, my objective was to delineate and assess the causal mechanisms linked to ideational structure in its own transformation.

A causal mechanism can be thought of as a series of regular links that lead from cause to effect. Some philosophers believe these links are most persuasive if they work through the intentions and behavior of individuals.¹⁸ Thus WAI attempts to capture how exactly it is that expectations and events conjoin to open room for agents to overcome collective ideation problems in some circumstances and not others. For example, the conjunction of epistemic expectations that are contradicted by events and that entail negative consequences facilitate actors' ability to overcome disincentives to change in these ways: by raising the issue of change on the public agenda, by giving individuals an incentive to act and the belief that action might succeed, by lowering fears that efforts for change will be met by social sanctions, and by giving critics of the old orthodoxy ammunition to rally supporters.¹⁹ Since the structural aspects are what concern me, it should not be surprising that I do not discuss causal mechanisms linked to agency or network "process."

My key claim in this regard is that structural dynamics probabilistically affect the possibility for change—i.e. the likelihood agents will overcome barriers to the replacement of extant epistemes. Accordingly, WAI delineates the different ways collective ideas and events can interact, opening space for change in some circumstances and not others, as well as the way that the relationship between extant dominant beliefs and their potential alternatives affect such probabilities.²⁰ This may not tell us whether individuals will necessarily heed the circumstances presented in any particular case, nor why a particular structure—especially as involves the strength of oppositional ideas—exists. There is certainly plenty of room for agency and the network approaches favored by Nexon and Jackson to figure in here. But any effort at theorization involves abstraction, which necessarily pays attention to some aspects more than others. That relationalist mechanisms do not

17. This adopts Arrow's logic (1951) on preferences and applies it to ideas.

18. Little 1991, 15.

19. Legro 2000b has a more extensive discussion of these mechanisms.

20. Legro 2000a, 262–66.

appear central in WAI should not detract from the mechanisms that are discussed and examined at length.

Explaining American Foreign Policy Ideas

This brings us to the theoretical and empirical utility of Jackson and Nexon's preferred argument, especially as it applies to U.S. foreign policy.²¹ Conceptually their relationalist perspective has much to offer. It tries to capture the contingent nature of many social phenomena and the ongoing transformation as agents and structures interact and even constitute one another. Such a view is attractive not only because of its avoidance of problems linked to crude structural or agency accounts, but also because at some basic empirical level we know that process matters. Our daily social interaction and negotiations with others undeniably indicate that the results of these encounters might sometimes have been different given different processes.

All that said, their approach is wanting in that it offers no clear a priori explanation for variation. This is so because we do not know what variation looks like in their main causal variable "relations" (networks, interaction, and so on). Since social relations between, and processes among, actors are a constant, it is unclear what it is that works to produce different outcomes. The result is akin to the old horror film *The Blob*—relationalism just keeps pouring in every analytical space no matter how one tries to shut the windows and seal the doors. The relationalism portrayed here seems unable to offer critical analytical boundaries such as those between cause and effect, continuity and change.

These problems are evident in Jackson and Nexon's explanation of the evolution of American ideas. In essence they are arguing that a combination of American identity and its "commonplaces" account for unilateralism and internationalism. Thus they posit that American exceptionalism, a Western ethnocentrism ("heliotropism"), and anticommunist commonplaces explain both continuity after World War I and change in World War II. How these constant concepts could explain both continuity and change is ambiguous conceptually. They might argue that these ideas, and indeed American identity, are not constant but are deployed by actors, rhetorically and politically, differently over time. This begs the question, however, of why this is so and why some arguments resonate broadly and others

21. My remarks here are necessarily limited and tentative—Jackson and Nexon have not been able to articulate fully their ideas in the space given them and any final judgment must wait a fuller reading.

do not.²² Jackson and Nexon's solution seems to be a call for "careful empirical analysis of precisely where heterodox ideas emerged in a network, where they spread to, and what processes of legitimization and persuasion took place at various critical locations" in specific cases.²³ But this answer leads them back to their own complaint that constructivists often only "explain" through empirical re-description.

Such issues aside, some of Jackson and Nexon's analysis on the United States is not without merit. The prominence they put on anticommunism is an interesting focus that receives sparse treatment in my own account. To date, however, I have found little evidence that indicates anticommunism *was* a central issue—either in the continuity after World War I or the change during World War II. It was an element in the various debates and did play a central role in the *degree* of American involvement after World War II—after the United States had already embraced a willingness to make security commitments to other major powers.

Whither the Debate

Although most of their critique misses my argument, Jackson and Nexon have touched on important analytical territory. Moreover, the general theoretical garb they and I prefer looks relatively similar given the variety of wardrobes in international relations debates. Perhaps their relationalist perspective complements, more than competes with, the epistemic account in WAI. Relationalism turns our attention to the importance of understanding how it is that the legitimacy and social plausibility of some, especially oppositional, ideas prosper while others do not. There is clearly much more to be understood related to the dynamics of continuity and change in collective ideas. Such an understanding will involve not only further conceptual development (and debate), but also a broader examination of how collective ideas such as the epistemes documented in WAI have been maintained and transformed in a variety of other issue areas and countries.

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22. For example, Jackson and Nexon (2001, 17) suggest that the shift to inter-nationalism occurred because "there had emerged a network" committed to the defense of Western civilization. But if true, why did it occur during World War II and not after World War I?

23. Jackson and Nexon 2001, 15.

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