I am already looking forward to the discussion of the papers on this panel, as much because of the discussants as the papers themselves. Roxanne and Ido have managed to raise a number of extremely important – and to my mind, often troubling but still fascinating – observations about how we do constructivist research. Actually, on first reading their comments I thought they had simply misunderstood, and/or were calling for me to do a different study than the one I had chosen, so I was initially quite disappointed. But having corresponded with Ido (I include some of that here) and having thought about it some more, I’ve now come to a far more appreciative and nuanced view of their contributions, which I think should provide a good basis for further discussion.

Ido and Roxanne both lament the ghostly nature of youth in my study: always haunting the narrative without ever appearing in the flesh. Ido notes that "the group whose identity is the object of the study - post-Soviet youth - does not speak for itself; the focus is entirely on the construction of youth culture by adults, and the youths' own viewpoint is conspicuously absent." Roxanne also questions the absence of youth voices in my study, albeit not from an ontological standpoint. Instead Roxanne suggests that as a result of not including youth perspectives, “what emerges is a somewhat top down approach to national identity construction,” which in turn means that my assessment of agency is a rather truncated one. Ditto my discussion of hybridity and power: by not including the youth themselves, I miss important aspects of contestation and resistance inherent in national (youth) identity formation.

The reason for my initial disappointment with these comments was that, as I told Ido in a side correspondence, the youth was actually not my object of study; I was not trying to study youth culture, per se. Instead I was interested in a different question: how is cultural globalization responded to by the state? I had gotten to this question by doing a lot of reading about the predicament of national identity formation in the context of globalization. One thing that struck me in this reading was the almost complete dearth of studies that addressed the role of the state in this process. I thought this was a major omission and wanted to study it, especially in the post-Soviet context, where the new states were busy trying to construct national identities anyway amidst the ruins of the USSR. Youth culture and youth identity provided a manageable way to get at this question, but it was the *state’s* approach to youth culture and identity that I wanted to understand.

And here one thing begins to lead to another. If one sets out to study the state’s role in mediating globalization, one is by definition interested largely in exploring the attempted establishment of an authoritative national identity — by adults, for young people. In pursuing this question I became increasingly interested in state-society relations, partly because of the interplay between social discourse at large and state policymaking, and partly it seems to me that in understanding the state, *qua state*, it is important to examine a continuum of social relations ranging from discrete bureaucratic contexts to the very interstices of state and society. But to me, there is still ultimately a stopping point in analyses of the state (this is in itself a very interesting question, one that Roxanne has written about quite brilliantly). That is, if one wants to study the state’s role — i.e., state policymaking regarding youth identity — one does not necessarily study the youth, at least not directly. Of course, one could ask different questions. One could, for example, ask how youth culture is changing, or how young people respond to the organized attempts to construct a national
youth identity for them. Or one could explore national youth identity formation holistically, as a broad social process. But these would be different studies.

On one level this all has to do with the issue of what is sufficient as a research agenda. And here all the author has to do by way of reply, as I’ve done so far, is to explain that he/she simply set out to do something different. And at that point, unless the author’s chosen approach fails to capture that which he/she intends it to capture, there is not a lot more to say on the topic. And on this level it is interesting to think about the desirability of setting limits on the scope of inquiry. As I suggested to Ido, if one is studying state policymaking towards the youth one does not need — at least in terms of sufficiency — to study the youth. For comparison’s sake consider a study of American policymaking towards Afghanistan. Would one need to study those people involved in implementing such a policy (say, members of the armed forces), or those affected by it on the ground in Afghanistan?

I don’t think so, and did not do so, although now I think this is a shame. Of course in a trivial sense it is always a shame not to study all facets of a multifaceted problem. But this is all the more true when aspects of a phenomenon are tightly (and perhaps causally) intertwined. And from this perspective it seems rather unfortunate to study the state’s approach to youth identity without studying the state’s approach to the identity of pensioners, and for that matter immigrants, criminals, homosexuals, and many other significant social categories whose members actually or potentially diverge profoundly from the prevailing social bounds of belonging. Even within what I set out to, Ido and Roxanne are correct that because I fail to explore youth identity itself something important is missing from my study. I can see how there is a kind of hollowness or lack of completion; like a meal without any dessert. I think part of this regret (which a number of other readers have expressed) comes from a natural curiosity to know how “story” comes out. The state and organized social actors are busy trying to construct an identify for youth, but will they succeed in the end? Part of it, too, I cannot help thinking, has to do with our own adolescent frustrations: adults are endlessly and condescendingly making decisions for young people, and (as someone whose elderly parents just visited can attest) we never entirely outgrow these frustrations! And part of it is precisely the desire to *fully* comprehend the broader question of national identity formation in a given social context, something which for its coda requires coming to grips with the full human dimension of social and political processes. That is, on an emotional level we want to know how the youth feel, or what it matters to them that state and society have specific expectations, and how and why these expectations fit alongside a new world of possibilities that has suddenly exploded wide open. So yes, I take this point about the absence of young people. I wish I had managed to study the youth more (I actually have done this to some extent and will include it in the final manuscript).

On another level, though, there is something far more interesting and important going on than merely the question of sufficiency or satisfaction in research agendas. And this has to do with an implicit normative agenda caught up with the choice of methods and their underlying ontological standings. This normative agenda is evident in Ido’s larger point: "[The authors] presuppose that it is possible to study another nation's identity independently of the author's own embeddedness in a national and historical context; independent of the author's vision of the identity of his/her own society. And they presuppose that the truth of their claims lies in correspondence to Russia's objective reality rather than in their embeddedness in an enduring Western discourse about
Russia." In this way, then, I fall into the abiding tendency to reproduce prevailing discourses of power and objectification, both by failing to allow subjects to speak for themselves and by (unintentionally) projecting my own culturally embedded understandings -- much like an ideological Rorschach test. As Ido puts it, "the identity of the groups being studied is not constructed by the groups themselves so much as by the authors."

This panel is supposed to focus on the relationship between power and identity, and what Ido is suggesting is quite apropos of that focus. Power, in his reading, is everywhere, saturating even ostensibly dispassionate scholarly analyses in highly predictable ways. Accordingly, scholars are often unwittingly complicit in reproducing the fundamental understandings upon which insufficiencies of exploitation are based, inasmuch as what they reproduce is "normal" and therefore indistinguishably commonplace.

Ido goes on to say that “Although he appears more optimistic than Richter and Larson regarding the ability of these new nations to shake off their Russian/Soviet past, even Blum acknowledges that the ‘massive influx of neoliberal norms’ dovetails with ‘the lingering presence of statist assumptions’ (p. 26). He writes that ‘the ubiquity of statist assumptions in the post-Soviet context suggests that the institutional legacy of the USSR is in play’ (p. 25). Ultimately, then, even Blum's analysis can be read as a variation on the metaphor of Russia as a learner that is just about ready to join the West; just as soon, that is, as the ‘lingering presence’ of vestiges of despotism would entirely recede into the past.”

Again, my first reaction was one of disappointment, because I think Ido misinterpreted my use of the term "statism." I was referring not to despotism, but rather to the Leninist legacy of looking to the state for guidance and help-- in this case, as a partner in promoting a favored youth identity. This tendency to look to the state was massively propagandized from the original Bolsheviks on, and was even more massively institutionalized throughout Soviet history. It would be hard to imagine such ideas and tendencies disappearing with the fall of the USSR, and not surprisingly I find abundant empirical evidence of it. But such "statism" has no bearing whatsoever on which lessons are learned from westernization or modernization; I don’t suggest that this is a legacy that needs to be overcome before these countries can become modern. In fact, as I note, modern-western ideas relevant to youth identity (having to do with individualism and technological proficiency) are quite readily absorbed regardless of prevailing statist attitudes. So anyway I don’t seek to characterize post-Soviet cultural entrepreneurs — either in absolute terms or relative to the West — with reference to their backwardness, Orientalism, or indeed any other quality.

But upon further reflection the specifics of my study, and of whether Ido has gotten me right or not, are really rather secondary. It strikes me that from the perspective Ido has raised it doesn’t really make any difference what I intended to do, since merely by adopting an objectivist, empiricist epistemology while failing to problematize my own analytical lens in the process, I allegedly become entrapped in the very hegemonic project I naively imagine myself to be studying. And it is true that I do call attention to various modalities of political action and values associated with the construction of youth identity in these three cities. Clearly the fact that I even notice such phenomena to begin with reflects an unavoidable comparative framework, one which draws among other things on my own cultural context (otherwise nobody would see its “relevance”). But
I don’t agree that there is an entrapment inherent in adopting a conventional constructivist stance. I don’t understand why a scholar, armed with reasonable sensitivity and self-criticality, can’t step far enough outside his/her established social position to be able to explore actors or objects empirically without, in so doing, reproducing all essential aspects of the prevailing discursive and institutional system.

But these, I think, are the questions. If I examine the state or state policymaking, do I thereby privilege existing authority structures? And, along with such structures, the entire associated system of extraction and value appropriation; indeed, the whole miserable genealogy of ideological seduction, appropriation, and uneven exchange? Is not my very way of casting the issue an exercise, or at least an expression, of power? (Is that not what is implied in Ido’s use of the term “domestication” to describe those who employ conventional constructivist methods along with their positivist underpinnings? Tamed, as it were, by epistemological constructs spun out of power.)

Incidentally I think this perspective is directly related to the concerns raised (regarding my paper and others) about studying elites instead of subalterns. And as I’ve already suggested, to an extent I agree with this concern. Looking at the bottom of a hierarchy is bound to be illuminating about its top, and indeed about the structure and maintenance of the whole — not to mention the human experience of living within any such structure. But I don’t believe that one ought to study subalterns for normative reasons. Here again, does the act of analytical objectification involve inscription in a subtle discourse of domination? If I inquire uncritically (or “dispassionately”) into the actions and opinions of elites — that is, those who make and implement state policy — do I thereby reproduce and legitimate social hierarchy?

I don’t think so. In my reading such a postmodern critical perspective involves (ironically) asserting the objective and fixed meaning of an analytical act, and then calling for a radically subjectivist alternative epistemology. While I am sympathetic with what I take to be the normative impulse associated with this sequence of moves, I resist the notion that scholars can’t avoid imposing their assumptions and values to the extent that it vitiates their ability to understand their intended object of study. But, I’m certainly not interested in rejecting this viewpoint out of hand. And more productively, I would be very interested in engaging this perspective at its subjectivist foundations through exploring an emotional epistemological grammar. In fact I was delighted for this reason by Roxanne’s question at the end of her critique of my paper, where she wonders “whether cultural entrepreneurs, in the process of constructing youth identity also reconstruct their own identities and that of the nation. . . .” I don’t know whether Roxanne had in mind exclusively social identities or if she meant to include dynamic psychological aspects as well, but I think such questions open up the possibility of incorporating personal and emotional insights into discursive approaches, something that might be extremely rewarding.