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**Discourse and Identity Panel**  

**Response to James Richter and Jutta Weldes, Critiques of Imperial Encounters**

I want to begin this response with a brief discussion of my motivations for this book because I think they are relevant to some of the issues raised by Jutta and James and because they open up to further reflections and self criticisms. As Audie points out in her response, in the early 1990s the issue of identity did not figure much on the IR agenda and my motivation for *Imperial Encounters* was not really identity per se, but the puzzle of how it was possible for such a truly horrible thing like colonialism to happen - and to happen at the hands of those who identified themselves as “enlightened,” “freedom-loving,” and “civilized.” In one sense this might not seem like a real puzzle, not an original topic, because certainly a great deal of work already existed on colonialism and the racist stereotypes that underlay it (really excellent work that I learned from and that informs my own work). Of course, addressing such an issue was bound to lead to the question of identity whether it was on the IR agenda or not. I wanted to put the issues of representation and enabling discourses firmly in the academic field of international relations, to make the larger point which I guess has come to be one of the points that the study of identity more generally wants to make, i.e. that international relations isn’t just about the struggle for power (military and economic) but that it is about constructing identities that enable inclusions and exclusions and all sort of horrible things, as well as just enabling everyday, local, seemingly insignificant practices. I wanted to show that the things I found so interesting about the works of scholars such as Foucault and Derrida could be useful in studying IR and could enable us to ask different questions, study IR differently. I also wanted to show that these
complicated ideas could be discussed and “applied” if you will, in a way that was not so obscure that intelligent, open-minded colleagues could actually understand what deconstruction, social construction and so on were all about and might be able to glimpse how they could be useful in helping us, as scholars and as human beings, to understand the world. Another important thing I wanted to do was to see if traces of earlier representations have been carried forward in time to more recent situations, including academic discourses. This last item was/is especially significant to me because it implicitly raises the issue of who “we” as IR scholars and as writers (creators of our own discourses) of IR are. It raises the question of our own identities in our work. (More on this later).

Now, to some of the specific issues raised in the critiques. First I will address the issues James raises about Imperial Encounters. As James correctly points out, my study does not address causes or change. He does not think these are necessarily problems with the study because I do not claim to address these things. However, he suggests that my study does not allow for change and that this is a problem because my theoretical framework does not include conceptual tools for understanding how disruptions to the binary oppositions that underpin the identities might occur. This is an important issue to raise and one that I’ve thought about a great deal and that has troubled me. I’ve been concerned with the possibility that everything in my analysis is just a little too neat. I think this, in part, stems from the “methods” I used in this study. I have wondered if my effort to undertake this study in a fairly systematic manner by examining the three mechanisms of (1) presupposition, (2) predication, and (3) subject positioning is not a bit limiting in terms of the overall picture that emerges of how identities get constructed and what these identities are. This semi-formal approach, I think, made the study
more acceptable to journals such as ISQ. It offered a clear, perhaps even replicable way of approaching the subject, but arguably one that captured frozen snapshots of an extremely complex, dynamic process and resulted in identities that seemed fixed and unable to change.

So, I think what this method enabled me to do was to get at part of what language is all about and how it works. What it didn’t enable me to do, or what I did not do was to get at that more illusive aspect of language, that Kristeva refers to as the semiotic element, the desires and drives discharged through language. This point is relevant to another (and related) question James raises. Would the binary oppositions predominate so much in situations where power was more evenly distributed or where the exercise of power did not depend so heavily on violence. Perhaps not, but I can’t say without studying such a case. These particular binary oppositions are not meant to be generalizable across cases I didn’t examine. But I do think, in looking at say the U.S. vis-a-vis Britain and Europe we find a different set of binary oppositions. So perhaps it is the notion of binary oppositions that are generalizable, but precisely their content depends on what one is looking at. But regarding the issue of binary oppositions and their fixedness, I think it is important to stress the inherently unstable, indeterminative nature of language. It is only through practices that stability and determinations of meaning are realized, but this is always only temporary, always subject to disruption and here is the opening for change. In one sense change is always afoot, because nothing is every firmly fixed. So, here is the opening in my theoretical framework for the issue of change. The opening is in the conception of language itself that informs my study. So, I guess I don’t agree with James that my theoretical framework does not permit change. I do agree though that I did not pursue this opening very deeply and that my study tended to present a more firmly fixed picture of a social reality and identities than could
have been shown. I don’t think the problem is in the theoretical framework, though it might be in the method. I have not come to a conclusion on this. How exactly do we get at the “other” aspect of language, what Kristeva refers to as the poetic and would this help us to identify slippages, gaps, and other things that ultimately escape language?

In response to James’ point that I don’t consider subaltern identities and discourses that might disrupt resist the prevailing ones, I plead guilty. There are a couple of reasons I chose not to focus on these. One is that the major focus was on how United States’ and British discourses constructed identities (their own and their respective others) which made certain practices possible. While other discourses may have had the potential to disrupt and create alternative identities, for the particular practices I looked at it was the dominant discourses that were primarily implicated in the construction of a reality that made these practices possible. Alternatives were marginalized or totally silenced and I mention a couple of these instances, e.g. when U.S. leaders refused to see Filipino leaders. I do not want to dismiss this criticism though, because it is true that in my study the subjects with agency were the U.S. and British. I do present a narrative in which Filipinos and Kenyans had no agency at all. I want to stress that this should not be taken to suggest that Filipinos and Kenyans in all their diversity, in all the varied situations they encountered, and the many strategies with which they maneuvered through their individual and collective lives exercised no agency. Undoubtedly they did. However, in the decisions leading up to the particular policies I examine, they did not exercise agency. They were totally excluded, acted upon as if the were incapable of input, etc. etc. I am sure the cases I examined could be looked at from alternative perspectives such as a post-colonial one that would get at the subaltern voices and alternative identities. But as far as U.S. and British policy makers
were concerned, there were no such alternatives, at least in the sense of what was at work that made their policies possible.

Regarding situations where power does not depend so heavily on violence, there are two points to be raised. First, we need to ask what we mean by the term violence. I think James means physical violence here and intuitively it makes sense that committing physical violence against someone would require a great deal of “othering” even if it was not accomplished in some instrumental sense. Still, one could argue that a great deal of relatively subtle “othering” which draws upon binary oppositions goes on well in advance of violence, and again I do not want to imply this happens with instrumental goals in mind. Second, and I know Ted asked us not to respond by saying “I addressed this somewhere else,” but in this case I did. This is why in chapters 6 and 7 of the book I addressed the issues of Foreign Aid, Democracy, and Human Rights (Chap. 6) and Academic Discourses on North-South Relations (Chap. 7), both situations where overt physical violence is not predominant. I wanted to see how traces of earlier discourses might be manifest in seemingly humanitarian concerns on the one hand and in “objective” social science discourses on the other hand. I think these two things have particular current relevance in light of the renewed mission of the United States to spread its enlightened vision of democracy around the world.

Jutta raises the very important issue of the uptake of discursive constructions of identity. This is, in my view, one of the most important issues that need to be addressed when thinking about discourse and identity. It is also one of the most difficult to deal with, which may be the reason why it is often not dealt with at all. This is important for the reasons Jutta discusses. At some point discourses have to be connected up with flesh and blood human
beings. This, of course, does not mean that we have to move to an individualist analysis, because I think a great deal of the power of discourse(s) is the fact that they are taken up collectively. This has really been an issue that has always troubled me and to be honest I have not figured out how to satisfactorily handle it. Its important because, despite the fact that the notion of discourses having some kind of relative autonomy is appealing to me and I do believe this, I think it is important that we do not slip into analyses in which discourses come across as totally autonomous and unconnected to concrete individuals and practices taking place in the world. I like Jutta’s suggestions, the notion of interpellation and drawing upon insights from cultural studies. I don’t think these two options are necessarily mutually exclusive. Jutta gives some examples such the pervasive use of the word “we” and subject identities/positions that individuals can be interpellated into such as “freedom-loving democrat.” Oppositions can also be useful here because “we” recognize the “we” implicitly in what “we” are not, e.g. “we” are not “terrorists” or “evil doers.” As Jutta correctly points out, I did not do this in my analyses. I could have though, because I don’t think there is anything within my framework that would preclude this. As she suggests I would have had to move beyond elite discourse into the wider realm of culture. A question that arises for me though is, can we ever do more than suggest the subject positions which are made available for people to be interpellated into? In other words, analyses could show the pervasiveness of certain subject-positions that are widely dispersed throughout fields such as policy-making, academic fields, and even into the cultural realm. The very existence of widespread dispersion would be evidence of such subject-positions. However, how would begin to show that concrete individuals or even collectives had actually been interpellated? Somehow we would have to get down to the “everyday” world(s) of those
concrete individuals who are ripe for interpellation. Would we revert to survey research? I don’t think so. At least, I personally do not want to that. This raises an issue for me that is close to the one Jutta raises about elite vs. popular discourses of identity. This is the issue of whose voice(s) get to be heard? Whose discourse(s) count as evidence of some kind of identity being constructed or resisted? Focusing on popular culture is a move in the right direction, at least in spirit. However, I am not so sure it doesn’t potentially run up against similar limitations or criticisms that a focus on elite discourse would. We can look at films such as the ones Jutta mentions, Rambo, etc. or the novels, Hunt for Red October, and these would give us a sense of whether subject positions/identities constructed in elite, policy-making discourses were more widely dispersed and this would certainly be important and would further support analyses. Still, how would we know if concrete people were actually incorporated into the available subject positions? Aren’t the producers of popular culture themselves, a kind of elite group? A possible alternative I have been thinking about lately is the idea of individual stories of ordinary/extraordinary people maneuvering through their everyday lives and the possibility that these stories may be useful in our understandings of broader issues. This is still very much in the thinking stages for me.

A final point to consider regarding this issue of uptake is that in thinking in terms of discourses being taken up by their audiences we might run the risk of thinking in terms of something like a two-step process wherein the first step discourses are powerful, mysterious forces that hover above humanity and in the second step concrete individuals or collectives take them up. I don’t think this is necessarily what Jutta is suggesting, but it is one way of interpreting the question of uptake and one way of interpreting the concept of interpellation
which may be why Althusser has been considered by some as too rigid a structuralist, (though I
don’t necessarily think the concept of interpellation leads to this). I think the process of
discursively constructing and identities and their uptake occur simultaneously. The identities
constructed appear as natural, inevitable. They simply convey what “we” already know ourselves
to be. In a sense they are already uptake because if they weren’t it is likely they would have
very little power. For example, if the contemporary constructions of the world - the so
overwhelmingly simplistic constructions that seem to hit us from every direction today - did not
convey to the population what they already know themselves to be and what they know “others”
to be, they would lack power. They would not be convincing. This points to the significance of
the concept of the trace that I mentioned earlier and the importance of thinking of the dispersion
of identity construction not just throughout space but also throughout time, history.

I want to touch on the last issue Jutta raises, i.e. the institutionalization of discourses of
identity in specific institutions and use this as an opening to briefly discuss an issue this raises for
me. Here I must confess that I have not read Ido’s book, but am now very curious about it. He
may deal with the issue I want to raise here. He certainly deals with it in his own discussion on
the power and identity panel. This is the issue of our constructions of our own identities as
scholars in our writings about identity. I think when we raise the issue of the discursive
construction of identity that sooner or later it leads to this question unless, of course, we want to
draw some arbitrary limit as to how far our concern with identity construction is allowed to go.
Because we are all involved in writing and because writing produces discourse, we are all
individually and collectively discursive producers of meanings, realities and identities.
Addressing this and its potential consequences may not appeal to everyone of us, but I think it is
important that this issue be addressed. Over the past few years I’ve been particularly concerned about where we as scholars are in our own writing, where I am personally in my own writing, (or perhaps more accurately, where we are not, which is in our own narratives/stories.) I’ve been concerned with how the adoption of a certain academic voice when we write is implicated in the discursive construction of identities and is imbued with power and have begin to ask, “How might we write differently?”

(File=idresponse)