Discussant Comments on Interests and Identity  
Jennifer Sterling-Folker, April 26, 2003


As discussant for these works I have to acknowledge that I initially had a difficult time responding to them in a critical fashion, largely because I agreed with so much of their arguments. Thus the margins of all of the texts are replete with such comments as “yes!” or “I agree” and “exactly!” I know that Rawi and Ted, who are serving as discussants for my own work, may find this odd as they know first-hand how much analytical and methodological distance there is between us on a variety of subjects. I have tried hard not to read their comments yet (I don't want to conflate my comments about their work with my reaction piece to their comments), but I'm sure that we will have numerous points of disagreement. That said, I agreed so much with the central premises of all three works that it was difficult for me to get beyond my preliminary reaction that their arguments were extremely convincing.

Well, of course, that sentiment didn't last, since being an IR theorist means one usually has something negative to say about other people's work. But rather than provide a straightforward critique of each piece, I would like to raise a series of questions or problems that can be drawn from a reading of the three pieces on this panel. These questions are ones with which I have been grappling, and let me say from the outset that I do not pretend to have satisfactory answers to them. In fact, Ted and Rawi know from reading the chapter from my book that my own answers to some of these questions remain poorly formulated, if not deeply flawed. But I believe that these questions/problems are fundamental to the project of constructivism and identity, and so I hope that we might collectively and explicitly address them in some fashion.

Central Point of Agreement

The reason why I concur so rigorously with each of you is because all three of you argue that nation-state identity is not the result of systemic forces (putting aside Ted's finding for a great power ID for 1955 Soviets for a moment) and that national interests instead derive from identities that are internal and specific to each nation-state. I entirely concur with this general proposition, and I continue to be amazed that neorealists and Wendtian (or what Ted calls systemic) constructivists either miss or deny this point. It seems so blatantly obvious that there are fundamental contradictions between the tenets of constructivism and a systemic analysis that posits states as unitary actors, and I really don't understand why anyone had to point this out to Alex Wendt (Jutta and Ted, you are much kinder to Alex on this point than I have been, but I know we generally agree here).

As for the neorealists, some of them have figured out that polarity is underdetermining, but they still seem wedded to a "material/ideational" divide that treats constructivism as antithetical to
realism and hence avoids any real discussion or contemplation of social practice and identity. Since I for one am convinced that, as Jutta put it, "national interests emerge out of the representations… through which state officials and others make sense of the world around them" (280), I don't know what other realists have to gain by sticking to their guns (how realist!) and refusing to budge from a flawed analytical position. I remain somewhat hopeful, in this regard, that the recent US invasion/occupation of Iraq might do something to gel the collective analytical inertia of the neorealist camp. Such an event is surely not explained in any adequate fashion by relying solely on unipolarity. Certainly polarity is a structural frame of reference for the event (superpowers bully whomever they want), but it doesn't tell us why Iraq? why now?

These questions seem to cry out for answers that are non-systemic, and could involve some combination of US domestic institutions (including a botched Presidential election), societal attitudes and identities before and after 9/11, and even the personal histories of individual policy-makers ("Of course I hate Hussein," says Bush Jr. at a press conference, "he tried to kill my Dad!"). Neorealists have actually spent a good deal of time and effort in various op-ed pieces and other venues voicing their objections to the Administration's policies. Yet their arguments were always formulated on the basis of what they felt were purely "rational" and "objective" interpretations of the national interests. The fact that these objections went entirely unheeded might underscore for some scholars just how much is missing from such interpretations when they turn from advocacy back to explanation again.

In any case, there is a meeting of the minds here between myself, Ted, Jutta, and Rawi on the essential point that interests are socially constructed and derive from collective identities. The content of a nation-state's national interests, how it formulates its national interests, and how it formulates its foreign policy are not pre-given from the environment in which the nation-state exists. Interests depend a great deal instead on "who they thought they were" (Rawi, viii), on "the taken-for-granted background that accounts for most of daily life" (Ted, 18), and on "a process of representation through which state officials (among others) make sense of their international context" (Jutta, 277).

Where, then, do the problems lie? The most obvious analytical danger confronting "non-systemic" (or what Ted calls "social") constructivist analysis is the tendency to treat a domestic context in isolation from the larger systemic environment in which it exists. In other words, in attempting to demonstrate how much more explanatory it is than a systemic-level explanation, it runs the risk of being too specific to its time and place while ignoring or failing to specify the larger structural dynamics that are interacting with and on the polity. There is also the tendency to generalize from the particular polity under inspection (a trap I myself fall into, so again I can hardly claim I've solved this problem either) or to make causal claims about identity when what is systemically external has not really been addressed. It's a danger that exists at the methodological level, but it has more fundamental theoretical implications as well. Let me start with the methodological…

Methodological Differences and the Analytical Questions They Provoke

The first and most basic question that confronts a social constructivist is, how do we get at these domestic, internal, collective identities that comprise the nation-state and lead it to formulate its
national interests in particular ways? That is, how do we develop a convincing, empirically satisfying (and ultimately positivist given our audience) story about these collective identities and how they translate into a nation-state's foreign policy? The first issue contained in what seems like a relatively straightforward question involves data selection itself -- whose language or whose texts do we use to establish its contents and parameters? What "extant linguistic resources" (284, Jutta) do we rely upon to build the case for a particular outcome having resulted from a particular identity that a particular set of decision-makers had or has?

Each of you provides a different answer as to what type of data to use and where to look for it. Ted provides the most comprehensive discussion of his methodology, which is an inductive, interpretivist recovery of identity that works through a detailed examination of widely-read societal and state texts from particular years. Everything from popular fiction and textbooks to speeches and official state documents count as "evidence." Ted's account of Moscow identity in 1955 and 1999 is incredibly compelling (Ted -- I ended up reading the whole book as it relates to two other projects I'm working on at the moment). The reason why its so compelling (beyond its sheer comprehensive) is because Ted doesn't just "tell" us what the components of identity are, instead he "shows" us, even as he admits to the obvious epistemological difficulties of developing a narrative of narratives and hence imposing meaning on them. “Showing” rather than “telling” is one of the most convincing techniques that I am aware of in theory-building, because it involves the reader in the process of discovery, as a sort of co-discover with the author. But it’s also a very difficult technique and Ted does a great job with it.

Alternatively, in order to recover content or components of identity, Jutta focuses almost exclusively on the state decision-makers who actually made the foreign policy choices. While there is some discussion of the societal components to US identity, these are secondary characterizations by other scholars. To establish the components of identity that were relevant to the Cuban Missile Crisis specifically, she relies primarily upon a mixture of public statements, memories, and accounts by the decision-makers themselves, as well as descriptions and characterizations of these decision-makers by other scholars. Rawi provides a framework that would seem to strike a balance between the methodological choices of Ted and Jutta, by arguing that "national identity, government preferences, and government strategies must be kept analytically and empirically distinct" (42). To establish the content of national identity for each polity under examination, he relies primarily on secondary accounts by other scholars. His discussion of government preferences and strategies also includes interviews with policy-makers and public documents and statements.

Now let me say that I am guilty of using secondary sources to build a case for a particular identity or component of identity as anyone, so my point is not to evoke a double-standard against someone for having done so as well. And, in fact, I am a bit skeptical of just how far Ted's inductive interpretive textual analysis can take us in our quest to understand why nation-states do what they do, a point I will return to later. My initial point here is instead that there are real difficulties involved in trying to both "get at" the collective identity and then sufficiently link it to foreign policy behavior. A comparison across these three works highlights these difficulties. Ultimately it is not clear to me either that identity at the societal level seamlessly translates into foreign policy behavior (an issue in Ted's work), or that state decision-makers are truly reflective of their polities and the identities percolating there (an issue in Jutta's piece), or
that we are actually "doing constructivism" when we provide an account of identity that is already preformed by others (an issue in Rawi's work).

Methodological/Analytical Questions Provoked by Rawi's and Jutta's Work

Let me do Rawi's methodology first, only because it's the easiest to analytically critique from a constructivist perspective and, in fact, I can use Ted's own arguments against it. It’s also the methodology I tend to rely upon, so these comments can be directed at my own work. At one point Ted observes that, "theorizing is a form of interpretation, and it destroys meaning," and "for a work on identity, it is absolutely imperative that meanings remain what they mean and do not become what the researcher needs to test a hypothesis" (25). This is exactly the problem in Rawi's presentation of nationalist identity. He is testing a hypothesis, quite a good one I might add, but to do so he relies on what has already been said about identity by other scholars to make the case for it. Thus his work is not about identity formation or construction per se; it is about the impact a particular type of pre-formed identity, in this case nationalism, has in the political processes and on the economic choices of newly independent states.

Rawi's analysis reads like a standard account of the political society-state machinations leading up to foreign policy choices as a result. That is, fights over differing interests within society put pressure on state leaders, who respond to the majority with particular foreign policy choices in order to stay in power. Now personally I love these sorts of accounts, but they neither rely on a textual analysis to recover identity, nor do they appear to be about anything beyond the typical pulling and hauling of interest group politics in a democracy. In fact, one could substitute big business vs. labor, or military spending vs. health care/education constituents for Rawi's nationalism vs. non-nationalism variable in each of these polities and come up with a very similar story about political struggles and policy-making. Identity (and therefore interest) is an independent variable used for other analytical purposes, and so a reliance on what other scholars have said about it is apparently sufficient. This isn't necessarily damaging to Rawi's argument, but it does raise the issue of how much he's really addressing or uncovering the construction of identity and hence interests in the first place. In fact, interests at both the individual (nationalist or not) and state level (whether the majority is nationalist or not) are pre-given, and the story Rawi has to tell is about "who gets what," which is a very classical political science story.

Jutta's analysis, on the other hand, does try to uncover and reconstruct the identity components and contestations at the state level. It makes intuitive sense to work at this level since these are the individuals who actually make the decisions, and I myself prefer to work at this level of analysis too because the linkage between identity and actual policy-making outcomes or choices seems relatively straightforward. The universe of appropriate texts to analysis is also automatically and manageably narrowed. The problem is, of course, how to establish the linkage between society and state and identity (and as with my critique of Rawi, this critique can be leveled at my own work as well). How exactly do we know that the vision espoused by a policy-maker resonates in society? How do we know the ID of decision-makers reflects that of society, or vice versa, and not just the idiosyncracies of the particular leader?

We could assume that state and society simply mirror one another, ie: the decision-maker is a member of that society and so she/he carries that societal identity into office with them. But I do
think there is a difference here between being a member of society, a sort of "man on the street" perspective, and that of being in a position of authority, whether its to make legislation, run a bureaucracies or agency, or make judicial decisions. These institutions are social practices with structural parameters that are causal in their own right. I think we need to treat them as intervening variables between societal identity and decision-maker identity, and so I am skeptical that we can assume state and society identities automatically mirror one other. Of course what I am talking about is the traditional foreign policy concept of "roles," which I know most constructivists would reject (I think Ted critiques it at one point) since they suggest pre-given interests based on one's position in particular institutions and structures. However constructivism also suggests that something like a large government bureaucracy is a social structure and therefore has its own intersubjective meanings that are continually reproduced by its participants. This means a decision-maker will have multiple identities based on the fact that they are decision-makers, and these are distinct from whatever identities they have as members of society at large.

Even if we ignore this issue, there is still the problem of how we can be sure that a decision-maker's particular vision reflects the collective, societal identity. Jutta's treatment of the relationship between state and society is decidedly skewed in favor of the state's impact on society since, "In representing for themselves and others the situation in which the state finds itself, state officials have already constructed the national interest" (283, her emphasis). Granted there are shared understandings between state and society, but ultimately it is the state officials who create the representations of foreign affairs that society will either accept or reject. Societal acceptance is even somewhat over-determined, due to the implicit assumption that decision-makers reflect the collective identity. To be fair, Jutta is very forthright that all of this is an issue, particularly in her footnotes, and she's clearly correct that "pronouncements by US state officials are often unhesitatingly accepted by much of the American public" (288). But is that because it actually resonates or because there is some general deference to authority (I don't know how many students I've heard say, in reference to Bush's policy on Iraq, "He's our President so he must know best")? Perhaps deference to government is a component of American identity, but that would be different from saying we can know the societal identity by looking at a particular leader's articulation of it.

Alternatively, among how many people does a leader's articulation need to resonate before we can say the leader's vision really does reflect the collective identity and vice versa? Jutta notes about the ongoing contestations of ID that "to the extent that such a rearticulation is successful (ie: persuasive), the result is a very different description of the international system" (285). But what does "persuasive" mean and how do we now when its happened? Do we use public opinion polls? Rely on election results? How many people have to be persuaded for it to be labeled a "successful" rearticulation? Will a simple majority do or does it have to be a 2/3rds majority? And why should we assume that every leader is in fact reflective of the collective identity? There are, after all, a host of factors that could have put them into office. Run a counterfactual exercise in which Gore won the last election, and I have my doubts we'd be occupying Iraq at this very moment. Would the societal identity be the same given that the leader might articulate a different vision? Yet if we derive societal identity from a particular administration's articulation of it, then wouldn't there be some sharp differences? Carter's election is another example that comes to mind, so often read as a reaction to Watergate and Washington's business as usual.
Reading collective identity on the basis of state decision-makers is highly problematic as a result, although I myself prefer to do so as well since it at least makes the linkage to foreign policy behavior relatively clear.

Methodological/Analytical Questions Provoked by Ted's Work

This latter point is exactly the problem one encounters in Ted's work, because he never discusses the institutions of Soviet/Russian foreign policy-making or the linkages between the state's identity and its foreign policy. This is not so problematic for the year 1955, when Ted uses texts from those in actual power like Khrushchev, but it is for the 1999 identities which are never sufficiently linked to who is in power and the foreign policy choices they make. In other words, the institutional linkages between society, the state, and foreign policy are never specified, they are simply inferred. The result is that while Ted's interpretative methodology provides us with a very good sense of identity as a societal construct, its difficult to see how foreign policy is actually being derived from it. The 1999 identities are particularly confusing because there are 4 of them and we are never told the exact institutional links between these societal identities, actual state decision-makers, and the actual foreign policy choices they made. Without the explication of these linkages, how can we be sure we aren't studying identity components that have little relevance to policy-making?

There is also a very real analytical danger that relying on interpretive textual analysis, even if massively comprehensive, can lead to a "forest for the trees" sort of problem. This was most obvious in Ted's work, though it has some relevance to Jutta's reliance on decision-maker accounts and texts as well. The danger involves arguing for the relevance of particular identity components, and hence interests, behaviors, and outcomes, based on the texts surrounding a particular event or from a specific year or series of years. What one gains in depth, one loses in perspective. In other words, while a deeper comprehension and appreciation for nuances is gained, what is lost is an awareness of broader structural dynamics both within the given polity and in terms of the environment in which the polity exists.

Regarding the lack of perspective within the polity, Ted's reliance on in-depth examination of particular years produces a surprisingly ahistorical snapshot of Moscow identity. Because history and political/economic/social structures are never specified, and because so much is left unsaid about prior contexts, Ted's account leaves the impression that there are no social structural or historical constraints on the development of collective identity beyond whatever the polity wants it to be in the particular year he is examining. And I honestly do not see how an inductive interpretative methodology would allow us to access and understand these prior contexts. Ultimately Rawi's method may shortcut understanding by providing historical overviews from secondary sources and thereby immediately imposing meaning, but at least its not providing an account of meaning in a vacuum.

In fact it is significant that Rawi is, as far as I could tell (and please correct me if I'm wrong), the only author here who notes not only that "there are limits to what societal actors can claim to pursue in the name of a nation, and those limits exist in society itself," (27), but also that those limits are about "historical memory" (28). Jutta does raise the issue of "degrees of freedom" in representations of national interests, but the limitations are apparently specific to each case and
involve material constraints (286). Yet why aren't internal historical structures that predate the case at hand and that are also cognitive constructions just as relevant to identity and interests? The Defense Department's preferences for action in the Cuban Missile Crisis was due not simply to the immediate historical context and the content of American foreign policy identity. It was also due to their being, in both a material and cognitive sense, a bureaucratic agency charged with the mission of defense for the nation-state. Hence that internal structure reproduces particular identities while foreclosing the possibility of others for participants in that structure.

Again the issue of roles rears its ugly head here, but the point is that certain identities may be unavailable due to particular structures internal to the polity, and a textual analysis does not allow one to access this parameter. Textual analysis instead documents the creative act of identity formation, which amounts to a snapshot in time. Neither Ted nor Jutta provide either a historical/cultural and political/economic overview of the polity in question or the political/economic structures and institutions that exist within the polity. They do not tell us about these structural contexts and hence do not inform us of the constraints that are prior to and imposed upon the creative act itself. In other words, they don't tell us how we got here, they only tell us what we are. Its analogous to having picked up a 300 page book, opening it to page 150, then being told that if it's not mentioned on that page it can't be relevant to the story. Nor are the limits to the social construction of identity ever theoretically spelled out as a generalizable proposition by any of the writers, Rawi included. So does this mean that anything goes? I assume each author would say no, but it's difficult to derive this denial from their arguments. Instead identity formation appears to operate free from historical, structural constraints within its own society/polity.

The other "forest for the trees" problem with deriving identity components from an in-depth textual analysis of particular years is that systemic pressures and constraints can also be entirely missed or ignored. In other words, whatever external, structural constraints have helped shape that identity prior to the year under analysis will also be ignored and analytically inaccessible. This problem is best exemplified by Ted's claims that the neorealist characterization of Soviet balancing in 1955 is not supported by the book's evidence, and that "what explains Soviet balancing behavior in 1955, to the extent that Soviet actions can be called that, are the changes in the Soviet understanding of itself and what this understanding implied about the decolonizing world" (272). Yes, but what prompted those changes? My guess is US behavior in the decolonized world, but there is no way to access or deny such a possibility with this methodology. Instead it directs us to the conclusion that, because the Soviets did not discuss the US as the specific motivation for their alliance behavior in 1955 texts, we can safely assume it was not trying to balance the US in a manner anticipated by neorealism.

This produces the rather odd argument that the US was more important to Moscow identity formation in 1999 than it was in 1955 ("the only external force capable of affecting Russian discourse in the nearest future after 1999 is US unilateralism," 269). And Ted's 1999 application chapter (5) is entitled "Unipolar World" while the 1955 application chapter (3) is entitled "Enabling and Constraining Soviet Alliance Choices," as if the Cold War had nothing to do with the Soviet desire for alliances in the first place. Again we are back to the analogy of the 300 page book. If they don't say it in 1955, are we really suppose to conclude that it's not relevant to identity and interests? And if we aren't suppose to reach such a conclusion, then how do we use
this particular methodology to access what is historically and structurally relevant at the systemic level? Should we analyze as many years as we can? Yes, probably, but it would certainly be difficult give the sheer comprehensiveness of the methodology (ie: how many lifetimes do you have?). Should we pick better years instead? Perhaps, but wouldn't the determination of which years also require that we impose meaning in the first place? And just how different might our findings on Moscow identity components be if we looked at 1949 or 1953 instead of 1955? How different would US identity components be if we examined 1987 and a post 9-11 date? And ultimately how can we justify generalizing from any one of these years about identity, interests, what is causal and what is not?

The methodology Ted utilizes also relies on a logic that wants it both ways. If a topic is explicitly discussed in multiple texts then Ted identifies it as a possible component of identity. Yet the "logic of the unthinkable," that Ted argues is essential for understanding identity and interests, also suggests that the absence of an explicit textual discussion can be taken as an indication of a component's relevance to identity. In critiquing Wendt's discussion of relations between the US and the Bahamas, for example, Ted argues that there is "true stability" in this particular relationship or "social structure" because "confidence in U.S. inaction is far more deeply embedded in the identities and discourses of the two states, such that the idea of invasion never even comes up as a possibility" (293). If what is unspoken is just as important to identity as what is spoken, then why isn't the absence of explicit verbal links between the US threat and Soviet alliance preferences in 1955 proof that the link exists? Even if we don't want to hold the methodology's feet to the fire in this way, the logic under-girding the methodology itself suggests that the absence of a variable from a time specific textual analysis cannot be taken as proof it was unimportant or unessential to the ID.

External Structures and the Differences They Can Make

But to be fair, neither Rawi nor Jutta are explicit about how external dynamics and structures are influencing identities and interests either. This returns us to the point with which I began and so I want to bring it back full circle before ending with the final (and most fundamental) question for all of you (and myself). Despite my own preference for non-systemic/social constructivism, it easily runs the risk of ignoring or failing to specify the relationship of a particular polity under question to external, systemic structures, whether those structures involve polarity, regimes, or the capitalist world system. Thus it runs the risk of producing analyses and conclusions that are too specific to a time and place, of not being able to say anything beyond the specific case study, or, worse yet, of generalizing about a polity or from a particular polity without analytically acknowledging the impact of historical external structures.

Now perhaps one might argue that there are no systemic/structural dynamics at work, that social constructivism negates the notion that these exist separately from the participation of the polity in them, and therefore there is nothing much to discuss. But none of you take that tack, and instead each of you suggest that there are indeed external structures "out there" that do effect, if not constraint, the social construction of identity and interests within a given polity. Ted even finds evidence for a systemic great power identity in the 1955 components of Soviet identity. The problem is that none of you specify what these structures are or discuss/acknowledge the
extent to which internal collective identity formation might have been bounded by them. This is important to do because such specifications serve as the theoretical check for each of us regarding what we can and cannot legitimately generalize from our particular case studies. It also affects what we argue about the process of identity construction and what elements might be beyond the control of participants and their social interactions.

Rawi's arguments for economic nationalism, for example, only makes sense in a world that is populated by nation-states with capitalist market economies. He observes as much in stating that "other important variables are involved, of course, as well as other influences on how governments interpret the material reality of the world economy and their actual and proper place in it" (206). This indicates that certain identity possibilities and hence interests have already been foreclosed by virtue of the capitalist world system in which these polities must now participate. And this raises a fundamental question -- exactly how important is the internal process of collective identity formation if the identity is already largely circumscribed by systemic structural parameters over which these later comers have little control? I don't think this point negates Rawi's argument about nationalism effecting economic choices, but it does provide the outer boundary for identity and economic interest possibilities for these polities. It therefore has significant ramifications for internal identity formation, and I'd like to know how this process works in practice.

Although Jutta does not discuss the structure of the international system, arguing instead that "national interests are not formulated, or deduced from the structure of the international system, and then endowed with legitimacy" (303), her analysis seems to rely on an underlying assumption of bipolarity. How else are we to understand the claim that there were boundaries to US national interest representations, because "the missiles function as a 'reality constraint' on the construction of plausible narratives" (286)? To be a reality constraint, US state officials must have had some sense of what these objects could do (they weren't flowers, right?) and already be predisposed to place them in an intersubjective category labeled "threat," instead of say "entertainment." Certainly there is wide latitude in how they might then represent that threat to themselves and the rest of society, but if the initial predisposition to label it a threat is derived from the missiles as a reality constraint, then something more is going on here than the construction of threat representation. Could this predisposition be due to external structural contexts such as bipolarity and regional relations? As with Rawi's analysis, it seems that certain identities and interests might be foreclosed due to the particular external structures.

Ted also seems to suggest the relevance of polarity in arguing, with regards to the 1999 identities, that, "there was no imperialist Other whose raison d'etre was the destruction of the socialist camp" (209). And he seems to confirm some neorealist expectations regarding geography and material concerns in his 1955 case study (83). But then what are we to make of his argument that "the theory of identity presented here already presumes that identities, norms, and interests are mutually constituted and hence, are pointed in the same direction" (262)? Clearly other things exist outside and beyond the internal mutual constitution of identity, as Ted acknowledges, but what are these things and how do they affect both the process and the content of the internal construction of identity? What kinds of boundaries or opportunities do they provide? If bipolarity and unipolarity matter to Moscow identity, then how much of what Ted discovers in Russian texts is home-grown and how much is being imposed by external
structures? Where is the dividing line between identity and interests as a function of the society/state and identity and interests as a function of systemic structures?

**Constructivism's How Versus Why Question**

These questions lead me to the final problem/question I want to raise with you. I think that an analytical balance must be struck between what is internal and external to a polity under analysis. Most of us tend to err on the side of emphasizing the internal, I think largely because systemic analysis has dominated in IR explanations and we are trying to provide a much needed corrective. But I think we need to be very careful not to throw "the baby out with the bath water." Let me explain this by discussing the common "how" vs. "why" distinction …

Much of constructivism and the exploration of identity/interest formation is concerned with the "how" question. Jutta provides an excellent description of this: "in examining the representations through which national interests are constructed, one is asking a particular type of question." Based on Doty's work, Jutta's labels this the "how-possible question," which "are different from the conventional questions of international relations and foreign policy analysis since these ask why particular decisions resulting in specific course of action were made" (283; her emphasis). The why questions are incomplete, she argues because "in examining the social construction of the nation interest of a state, one is thus asking not why a particular course of action was chosen but how it was possible" (284; her emphasis). A clear distinction is then drawn in most constructivist analysis over what is being explained, with "how was it done" substituting for "why was it done." Jutta herself applies this distinction in arguing that threats are a matter of interpretation and that realism "cannot explain why particular situations are understood to constitute threats to the state" (279; my emphasis). Rawi voices a similar sentiment in arguing that, "I do not argue that national identities trump material interests. Rather, national identities affect how governments interpret their material interests" (20).

However in practice this distinction between how and why is very difficult to maintain. Documenting how a threat or economic policy was socially constructed leads almost inevitably to providing a causal explanation for why the outcomes occurred as they did. I think Jutta recognizes this since she uses the term "quasi-causal argument" throughout her text to describe what she is doing, but of course this only underscores my point. And I suspect it's this sliding effect between how and why that explains Ted's argument regarding Soviet balancing in 1955. "Again even if the rationale had been geopolitical," Ted claims, "why did it take until 1955 to balance against the United States in these parts of the world?" (274). Surely this question itself belies the distinction -- geopolitics was the why, the timing was the how -- but in providing an answer that the latter contradicts the former, Ted has essentially argued that the how contradicts and hence trumps the why. It is a very small step from there to claiming that the how -- identity formation within the society -- is also the reason why the Soviets behaved as they did.

Thus as much as I like to rely on the distinction as well (and should point out that there is a similar concept in the study of art known as "form vs. content" that I find very useful), I've become increasingly convinced that this is a slippery slope and that the line between them may be impossible to maintain, at least in application. What starts out as "how" inevitably slides into
"why," and the answer from social constructivism is always "because of the internally-derived identity of the polity." This leads us right back to all the questions I raised in the last section about the relevance of external structures to identity and interest formation. An analytical balance needs to be struck here, because in treating social constructivism as a "how" question, its all too easy to produce a "why" answer that claims all outcomes are due to internal identity constructions. Ultimately there is too much interaction across polities and too much similarity in the world (across both time and space) for such an answer to make any sense.

The why question also lurks in the background at a more fundamental level for all constructivists and it does no good (for both constructivism and IR analysis in general) to refuse to address it. The why question is raised by the popular saying in constructivism that its "ideas all the way down." And one of the reasons to do non-systemic/social constructivism is because, as Ted puts it, "the recovery of domestic social identities is one possible way of making constructivism work all the way down rather than having it stop at the level of interstate interaction" (261). The question is, however, what is down at the bottom?

The answer you give to this question makes a huge difference as to what you think is possible and impossible in social relations, and it goes directly to issues raised earlier about the limitations of constructing identity. Does anything go? If not then, why not? Whatever answer you provide to this question then gives you a means to begin addressing issues of similarity and difference, change and stasis, and the possible and impossible. The answer also allows you to get at the how-why distinction from a different and more fundamental angle, so that the immediate how is occurring within pre-established why boundaries. I know constructivists will cringe at the term "pre-established," but if its ideas all the way down, doesn't that mean anything goes? Conversely if material or biological concerns are at the bottom, then those are pre-established and have theoretical consequences that need to be acknowledged and discussed. So let me personalize this issue in a more direct way…

Jutta -- why do people respond to threat? Is threat a why category separate from how threats are constituted? In other words, are we innately predisposed to see threat? Or is threat a socially contingent category in its own right? Could we imagine a world in which we had no conception of and hence no word for it? And what are the boundaries to the "articulation of linguistic elements and the interpellation of individuals into subject-positions"? Is there anything outside of or beyond language and meaning? Are "reality constraints" beyond language and meaning? Is the condition of "threat" a reality constraint? And Rawi, why do human beings have "social facts" or "historical memory" or "cultural symbols" (25)? Why have an identity at all, whether it’s national, ethnic, religious or gendered? Why do human beings feel to need to "ascribe political, economic, and cultural meanings to societies' understandings of themselves" (25)? And why do societies "interpret…material circumstances" in the first place (1)?

Finally, Ted, why do you "assume that the only motive for the ubiquitous presence and operation of identities is the human desire to understand the social world and the consequent cognitive need for order, predictability, and certainty" (4)? If "the presence of this social cognitive structure can account for the relatively high level of order and pattern we observe in social life" (23), then how come there is so much change in the world? Why focus exclusively on order as the primary human need? Human beings tolerate a great deal of disorder, they even promote
it at times, so why privilege order/structure over disorder/agency in this way? What are you assuming about human beings that is being left unstated and which is serving as a hidden parameter for your theoretical arguments? Why is it that human beings "have a need to understand" (6) or "want to be accurately understood" (15) and that "interested action is a universal" (18)? What is it about human beings that makes them this way? Why do they need to be social in the first place?

I look forward to learning from your answers.