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Trendy But Empty: A Response to Richard Jackson

Jonathan Rodwell
Manchester Metropolitan University

Jonathan Rodwell is a PhD student at Manchester Met. researching the U.S. Foreign Policy of the late 70's / rise of 'neo-cons' and Second Cold War

In this response I wish to argue that the Post-Structural analysis put forward by Richard Jackson is inadequate when trying to understand American Politics and Foreign Policy. The key point is that this is an issue of methodology and theory. I do not wish to argue that language is not important, in the current political scene (or indeed any political era) that would be unrealistic. One cannot help but be convinced that the creation of identity, of defining ones self (or one nation, or societies self) in opposition to an 'other' does indeed take place. Masses of written and aural evidence collated by Jackson clearly demonstrates that there is a discursive pattern surrounding post 9/11 U.S. politics and society. [\[i\]](#) Moreover as expressed at the start of this paper it is a political pattern and logic that this language is useful for politicians, especially when able to marginalise other perspectives. Nothing illustrates this clearer than the fact George W. Bush won re-election, for whatever the reasons he did win, it is undeniable that at the very least the war in Iraq, though arguable far from a success, at the absolute minimum did not damage his campaign. Additionally it is surely not stretching credibility to argue Bush performance and rhetoric during the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks also strengthened his position.

However, having said that, the problem is Jackson's own theoretical underpinning, his own justification for the importance of language. If he was merely proposing that the understanding of language as one of many causal factors is important that would be fine. But he is not. The epistemological and theoretical framework of his argument means the ONLY thing we should look at is language and this is the problem. [\[ii\]](#) Rather than being a fairly simple, but nonetheless valid, argument, because of the theoretical justification it actually becomes an almost nonsensical.

My response is roughly laid out in four parts. Firstly I will argue that such methodology, in isolation, is fundamentally reductionist with a theoretical underpinning that does not conceal this simplicity. Secondly, that a strict use of post-structural discourse analysis results in an epistemological cul-de-sac in which the writer cannot actually say anything. Moreover the reader has no reason to accept anything that has been written. The result is at best an explanation that remains as equally valid as any other possible interpretation and at worse a work that retains no critical force whatsoever. Thirdly, possible arguments in response to this charge; that such approaches provide a more acceptable explanation than others are, in effect, both a tacit acceptance of the poverty of force within the approach and of the complete lack of understanding of the identifiable effects of the real world around us; thus highlighting the contradictions within post-structural claims to be moving beyond traditional causality, re-affirming that rather than pursuing a post-structural approach we should continue to employ the traditional methodologies within History, Politics and International Relations. Finally as a consequence of these limitations I will argue that the post-structural call for 'intertextuals' must be practiced rather

than merely preached and that an understanding and utilisation of all possible theoretical approaches must be maintained if academic writing is to remain useful rather than self-contained and narrative. Ultimately I conclude that whilst undeniably of some value post-structural approaches are at best a footnote in our understanding .

The first major problem then is that historiographically discourse analysis is so capacious as to be largely of little use. The process of inscription identity, of discourse development is not given any political or historical context, it is argued that it just works, is simply a universal phenomenon. It is history that explains everything and therefore actually explains nothing.

To be specific if the U.S. and every other nation is continually reproducing identities through 'othering' it is a constant and universal phenomenon that fails to help us understand at all why one result of the othering turned out one way and differently at another time. For example, how could one explain how the process resulted in the 2003 invasion of Iraq but didn't produce a similar invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 when that country (and by the logic of the Regan administrations discourse) the West was threatened by the 'Evil Empire'. By the logic of discourse analysis in both cases these policies were the result of politicians being able to discipline and control the political agenda to produce the outcomes. So why were the outcomes not the same? To reiterate the point how do we explain that the language of the War on Terror actually managed to result in the eventual Afghan invasion in 2002? Surely it is impossible to explain how George W. Bush was able to convince his people (and incidentally the U.N and Nato) to support a war in Afghanistan without referring to a simple fact outside of the discourse; the fact that a known terrorist in Afghanistan actually admitted to the murder of thousands of people on the 11th of September 2001. The point is that if the discursive 'othering' of an 'alien' people or group is what really gave the U.S. the opportunity to pursue the war in Afghanistan one must surely wonder why Afghanistan. Why not North Korea? Or Scotland? If the discourse is so powerfully useful in its own right why could it not have happened anywhere at any time and more often? Why could the British government not have been able to justify an armed invasion and regime change in Northern Ireland throughout the terrorist violence of the 1980's? Surely they could have just employed the same discursive trickery as George W. Bush? Jackson is absolutely right when he points out that the actual threat posed by Afghanistan or Iraq today may have been thoroughly misguided and conflated and that there must be more to explain why those wars were enacted at that time. Unfortunately that explanation cannot simply come from the result of inscribing identity and discourse.

On top of this there is the clear problem that the consequences of the discursive othering are not necessarily what Jackson would seem to identify. This is a problem consistent through David Campbell's original work on which Jackson's approach is based[[iii](#)]. David Campbell argued for a linguistic process that 'always results in an other being marginalized' or has the potential for 'demonisation' [[iv](#)]. At the same time Jackson, building upon this, maintains without qualification that the systematic and institutionalised abuse of Iraqi prisoners first exposed in April 2004 "is a direct consequence of the language used by senior administration officials: conceiving of terrorist suspects as 'evil', 'inhuman' and 'faceless enemies of freedom creates an atmosphere where abuses become normalised and tolerated"[[v](#)]. The only problem is that the process of differentiation does not actually necessarily produce dislike or antagonism. In the 1940's and 50's even subjected to the language of the 'Red Scare' it's obvious not all Americans came to see the Soviets as an 'other' of their nightmares. And in Iraq the abuses of Iraqi prisoners are isolated cases, it is not the case that the U.S. militarily summarily abuses prisoners as a result of language. Surely the massive protest against the war, even in the U.S. itself, is also a self evident example that the language of 'evil' and 'inhumanity' does not necessarily produce an outcome that marginalises or demonises an 'other'. Indeed one of the points of discourse is that we are continually differentiating ourselves from all others around us without this necessarily leading us to hate fear or abuse anyone.[[vi](#)] Consequently, the clear fear of the Soviet Union during the

height of the Cold War, and the abuses at Abu Ghirab are unusual cases. To understand what is going on we must ask how far can the process of inscribing identity really go towards explaining them? As a result at best all discourse analysis provides us with is a set of universals and a heuristic model

Next, discourse analysis as practiced exists within an enormous logical cul-de-sac. Born of the original premise that each discourse and explanation has its own realities, what results is a theoretical approach in which a critique is actually impossible because by post-structural logic a critique can only operate within its own discursive structure and on its own terms. If things only exist within specific languages and discourse you must share the basic premises of that discourse to be able to say anything about it. But what useful criticisms can you make if you share fundamental assumptions? Moreover remembering the much argued for normative purposes of Jackson's case he talks about the effects of naturalizing language and without blushing criticises the dangerous anti-terror rhetoric of George W. Bush. The only problem is Jackson has attempted to illustrate that what is moral or immoral depends on the values and structures of each discourse. Therefore why should a reader believe Richard Jackson's idea of right and wrong any more than George W. Bush's? Fundamentally if he wishes to maintain that each discourse is specific to each intellectual framework Jackson cannot criticise at all. By his own epistemological rules if he is inside those discourses he shares their assumptions, outside they make no sense

What actually occurs then is an aporia - a logical contraction where a work's own stated epistemological premises rob it of the ability to contain any critical force. Such arguments are caught between the desire to maintain that all discursive practices construct their own truths, in which case critiques are not possible as they are merely one of countless possible discursive truths with no actual reason to take them seriously, or an appeal to material reality, but again the entire premises of post structural linguistics rejects the idea of a material reality.^[vii] In starting from a premise that it is not possible to neutrally describe the real world, the result is that without that real world, discourse analysis actually has nothing to say.

The issue of the material real world, or 'evidence' is actually the issue at the heart of the weakness of post-structural discourse analysis, though it does hold the potential to at least rescue some of its usefulness. The problem is simple, in that the only way Jackson or any post-structuralist can operationalise their argument is with an appeal to material evidence. But by the logic of discourse analysis there is no such thing as neutral 'evidence'. To square this circle many post-structuralist writers do seem to hint at complexity and what post-structural culturalists might call 'intertextuality', arguing for 'favouring a complexity of interactions' rather than 'linear causality'^[viii]. The implication is that language is just one of an endless web of factors and surely this prompts one to pursue an understanding of these links. However, to do so would dangerously undermine the entire post-structural project as again, if there are discoverable links between factors, then there are material facts that are identifiable regardless of language. Consequently, rather than seeking to understand the links between factors what seems to happen is hands are thrown up in despair as the search for complexity is dropped as quickly as it is picked up. The result is one-dimensional arguments that again can say little. This is evident in Jackson's approach as he details how words have histories and moreover are part of a dialectic process in which 'they not only shape social structures but are also shaped by them'^[ix]. However we do not then see any discussion of whether, therefore, it is not discourse that is the powerful tool but the effect of the history and the social structure itself. Throughout Jackson's argument it is a top down process in which discourse disciplines society to follow the desire of the dominant, but here is an instance of a dialectic process where society may actually be the originating force, allowing the discourse in turn to actually be more powerful. However we simply see no exploration of this potential dialectic process, merely the suggestion it exists.

Consequently because there is no interaction between the language the culture and the material then there is not much that can actually be done. All that is done is to repeatedly detail the instances where the same tropes occur time and time again and suggest they have an impact.^[x] What cannot be explained however is why those tropes exist or how they have an influence. So, for example, Jackson is unable to explain how the idea that the members of the emergency services attending the scene at the World Trade Centre on 9/11 were heroes is a useful trope disciplining the populace via the tool of Hollywood blockbusters and popular entertainments heroes. All he is able to claim is that lots of films have heroes, lots of stories have heroes and people like heroes. All might be true but what exactly is the point? And how do we actually know the language has the prescribed effect? Indeed how do we know people don't support the villain in films instead of heroes?

The reason it there is no attempt to explore the complexity of causation is that this would clearly automatically undermine the concentration on discourse. Moreover it would require the admittance of identifiable evidence about the real world to be able to say anything about it! For if something historical changed the meaning of a word, or if something about society gave the word a different meaning and impact, then it would be an identifiable 'something'. Moreover if the word is tied to and altered by an historical event or social impact, would it not be a case of assessing the effect of original event itself as well as the language?

The larger problem is that without clear causal links between materially identifiable events and factors any assessment within the argument actually becomes nonsensical. Mirroring the early inability to criticise, if we have no traditional causational discussion how can we know what is happening? For example, Jackson details how the rhetoric of anti-terrorism and fear is obfuscating the real problems. It is proposed that the real world killers are not terrorism, but disease or illegal drugs or environmental issues. The problem is how do we know this? It seems we know this because there is evidence that illustrates as much – Jackson himself quoting to Dr David King who argued global warming is a greater threat than terrorism. The only problem of course is that discourse analysis has established (as argued by Jackson) that King's argument would just be self-contained discourse designed to naturalise another arguments for his own reasons. Ultimately it would be no more valid than the argument that excessive consumption of Sugar Puffs is the real global threat. It is worth repeating that I don't personally believe global terrorism is the world's primary threat, nor do I believe that Sugar Puffs are a global killer. But without the ability to identify real facts about the world we can simply say anything, or we can say nothing.

This is clearly ridiculous and many post-structuralists can see this. Their argument is that there "are empirically more persuasive explanations."^[xi] The phrase 'empirically persuasive' is however the final undermining of post-structural discourse analysis. It is a seemingly fairly obvious reintroduction of traditional methodology and causal links. It implies things that can be seen to be right regardless of perspective or discourse. It again goes without saying that logically in this case if such an assessment is possible then undeniable material factors about the world are real and are knowable outside of any cultural definition. Language or culture then does not wholly constitute reality. How do we know in the end that the world not threatened by the onslaught of an oppressive and dangerous breakfast cereal? Because empirically persuasive evidence tells us this is the case. The question must then be asked, is our understanding of the world born of evidential assessment, or born of discourse analysis? Or perhaps it's actually born of utilisation of many different possible explanations.

It is however worth retaining some role for the understanding of discourse. The great strength of post-structural works like those of Richard Jackson is that they open up to historians the realisation that there are areas of understanding that are ignored. That a concentration on high politics, on specific actors, or ignoring what has previously been regarded as mundane, such as the power of a speech, is misguided. After all one of the earliest lessons when learning history is

that an understanding of an event is inevitably partly the product of ones own interpretation and discourse analysis does show that this interpretation is expressed by distinct language. We do not have to completely accept post-structuralisms arguments to see this is the case. The process of othering and discourse creation is everywhere. Some of the specific arguments are therefore also persuasive. In the present day it is clear popular perceptions of the threat to America, that Iraq was a threat, are partly the result of the conflation of meaning post 9/11. It is also clear that much of the complexity of the terrorist problem is being undermined by language that wilfully chooses to ignore this complexity. That is surely harming the publics understanding of current events.

However this doesn't remove the fact that the problem with approaches such as Richard Jackson's is that they are fundamentally weakened by their insistence that language is wholly determined by the oppositional process and has no relationship to material reality. The result is that nothing can actually be said about events! Moreover no criticism can be levelled. To deny an ability of language to accurately describe the way the world is, and then to use language to describe the way the world is, is simply untenable.^[xii]

But to conclude, if we actually take what is useful about these approaches, and begin to understand how language is related to a very real world we can achieve much. There is undeniably a relationship between language and events that needs to be understood. On some occasions it is the one laid out by Jackson or Campbell - language can discipline the direction of politics. But on more occasions it is actually born of the relationship between different sources of meaning. Perhaps the successful use of language is often a result of it saying something about events that is understood due to a shared ideology, history or sociological development. These are factors that we should understand. We must understand that language is not simply imposed from above with language the determinant factor in power. For, if we rightfully wish to pursue a normative project of criticising dominant and dangerous political thinking and action, it is important to make sure we are target the problems and not the symptom.

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^[ii] In practice most students of social science or history ought to have been introduced to these ideas in their theory and methods courses. For those who wish to pursue a more comprehensive understanding the literature is huge. The sources I have found most useful in my own studies are; Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*; Caplan, 'Postmodernism, poststructuralism and deconstruction'; Dews, *Logics of Disintegration*; Eagleton, *Literary Theory*; Finlayson and Valentine (eds), *Politics and Post-Structuralism*; Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*; Ninkovich, 'No post-Mortems'; Norris, *Truth and the Ethics of Criticism*; Norris, *Uncritical Theory*; Rosenau, *Post-Modernism*; Tallis, *Not Saussure*. For the application of post-structuralist ideas to history specifically readers should consult the 'Further Reading' in Evans, *In Defence of History*.

^[iii] David Campbell, *Writing Security* (1998)

^[iv] Ibid, pp. 24, 77-8.

[vi]. For a more detailed critique see Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (Columbia University Press, 1994)

[vii]. Dews, *Logics of Disintegration* (1987), pp. 181-92; Lichtenberg, 'In defence of objectivity revisited'; Norris, *Truth and the Ethics of Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 16-35, 54; Rosenau, *Post-Modernism* (1991), pp. 134-6.

[viii]. Jeffords, 'Commentary; Culture and national identity,' 92.

[x]. It is worth pointing out that there is no evidence, thus far, of a culturalist diplomatic historian not being able to find such tropes, wherever they have looked for them!

[xi]. Dean, 'Tradition, cause and effect, and the Cultural History of International Relations' *Diplomatic History* Vol.24 No4. (2000) p. 618.

[xii]. Eagleton, *Illusions of Postmodernism*, (Blackwell, 1996) p. 28.