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A Reply to Jonathan Rodwell

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Despite caricaturing both my argument and the nature of post-structuralist scholarship, Jonathan Rodwell makes a number of valid points of which I am in full agreement. For example, I fully concur that the utilisation of multiple levels of explanation enhances our understanding of political processes; the complexities of international relations cannot be captured by any single existing paradigm and our discipline should aspire to a healthy and tolerant diversity of theoretical approaches and methodologies. Consequently, there is some validity to Rodwell's concern that certain sections of post-structuralist scholarship entirely reject positivist social science, and instead engage in extremely abstract theorisation, usually articulated in a specialised jargon that is almost completely inaccessible to the wider community. Any theoretical perspective that shifts from attempts to address common questions from different perspectives to attacking the methods and assumptions of competing 'schools' risks losing touch with its subject and descending into an arid scholasticism.[1] At the same time, it is important to recognise, as Rodwell does, the important contribution that much post-structuralist scholarship has made to our understanding of international relations. Going beyond the narrow neo-realist focus on structure and the exercise of (hard) power, recent post-structuralist scholarship[2] has served to illuminate discursive and ideational aspects of international relations—the ways in which important aspects of international 'reality' such as anarchy and sovereignty exist as social constructions and the manner in which they are co-constituted through discourse and practice. Such studies, particularly when they are combined with other approaches and levels of explanation, greatly enrich our understanding of the complexity and diversity of international processes.

However, despite our broad agreements, Rodwell's essay is also a major disappointment. The crucial errors that punctuate his analysis, as well as his glaring failure to address the substantive empirical and normative issues at the heart of my research, forestall the opportunity to engage in wider and potentially more fruitful debates—about the role of academics in society, the purposes of academic research, the ethics of current security policy, the construction and maintenance of state power in an age of media, for example. First, it is disappointing that he misunderstands and misrepresents the theoretical framework I adopted for the study. Contrary to Rodwell's description of my analysis as post-structuralist, it is clear that methodologically speaking, I have adopted what might be more correctly described as a Constructivist approach, informed by the normative concerns of Critical Theory. That is, as the opening paragraph of my paper states, I conceive of the war on terrorism as both a set of institutional *structures*, and an accompanying set of *narratives*. I argue that each is *co-constitutive* of the other, and that we need to examine both to fully appreciate the nature and trajectory of the current American counter-terrorism campaign. I also suggest that we need to interrogate the social and political legitimation of power, as the exercise of state power can sometimes destabilise the moral consensus. Nowhere do I suggest that language is the only variable that we need examine, or that material reality does not actually exist, or that language and culture solely constitutes 'reality', or that the scripting of identity is the sole explanation for American policies—as Rodwell unfairly charges. Underlying my analysis is the assumption that while everything is text (even a bomb is a text—especially when soldiers write personal messages on them, but also when they are dropped in the name of 'freedom' or as a message to other dictators), text is not necessarily everything (bombs are also instruments of death that at the moment of detonation are impervious to any form of deconstruction).

In fact, my method involves a fairly traditional and well-established approach to research: setting out a research question; defining a clear and replicable methodology; collecting and analysing a large body of data using both internal textual analytic techniques and wider social theories; and then drawing a range of theoretical and political-normative conclusions. I also clearly state that because individual text analysis is not sufficient on its own to shed light on the relationship between discourse and social processes, critical discourse analysis adds a wider interdisciplinary perspective which combines textual and social analysis.[3] In essence, it is an attempt to move beyond the structure-agency debate to a 'post-dualist' approach[4] which integrates both a structural and agentic understanding of international political processes; it is an effort to add agency-based explanations to existing structural accounts.[5] The reason for adopting such an approach, as stated in the introduction to my paper, is simply to correct the imbalance that currently exists in the wider literature on the war on terrorism. A survey of the rapidly increasing scholarship on the subject reveals that it tends to focus on issues of geo-strategy and military power, weapons proliferation, domestic security measures, American imperialism, oil politics, international law, the history of Islamic fundamentalism—and the like.[6] There is very little analysis of the discursive and ideological dimensions of the American counter-terrorism campaign. This, I believe, is an imbalance that needs correction, particularly if we are to appreciate how the war on terrorism functions domestically.

If I am correct, Rodwell's main bone of contention lies with the post-positivist turn in international relations, and in particular with what might be described as the extreme end of the post-structuralist sub-field, rather than my paper specifically. Unfortunately, even here, Rodwell misrepresents and caricatures the post-structuralist approach, arguing for example that the weakness of their position lies in 'their insistence that language is wholly determined by the oppositional process and has no relationship to material reality'. In fact, post-structuralists argue exactly the opposite: the relationship between language and material 'reality' is such that they are indistinguishable; reality is text and text is reality; knowledge and practice cannot be separated. He also fails to provide an answer to the post-positivist charge that 'the real world' that he keeps referring to can only be accessed and interpreted through the subjective medium of language and symbolic fields—that there is no way of being sure who's account of the 'real world' is the correct one, or how to finally determine causality between different political events. He accuses the post-structuralists of going down an epistemological cul-de-sac because they insist that there are no external criteria for objectively evaluating truth claims, but then fails to say what the final incontrovertible test of 'reality' and 'truth' is. (If he knows what this ultimate test is, he has a responsibility to tell the rest of us!) In the end, Rodwell does not offer an alternative explanation for the present form and trajectory of the war on terrorism, or for some of its inherent puzzles. Instead, he merely insists that 'we should continue to employ the traditional methodologies within History, Politics and International Relations.' The point he fails to appreciate is that these traditional approaches have been shown time and again to be incomplete and inherently limiting, and we need to go beyond their narrow confines to build up a more complete picture. Rodwell actually admits as much when he argues that we need to utilize 'all possible theoretical approaches' to gain real understanding of international politics.

A final disappointment of Rodwell's critique lies in his failure to fully engage with either the substantive findings of the study or its normative implications. His only real attempt to deny the power of political discourses to shape foreign policy is to ask: '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 1980s? Surely they could have just employed the same discursive trickery as George W. Bush?' Rodwell fails to realize that this is exactly what happened; Britain did invade Northern Ireland and assumed direct rule and repressive security policies on the pretext of fighting terrorism. Moreover, very similar discursive strategies to the current war on terrorism were employed; the 'terrorists' were demonized as 'evil' and 'inhuman', and the danger posed by the IRA was discursively constructed as one that threatened British democracy itself. It was only later when the official discourse changed and the 'terrorists' were discursively transformed into 'nationalists' that substantive talks were able to get underway and a peace process was entered into. Similarly, Rodwell's assertion that 'In the 1940s and 50s 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' ignores the fact that most Americans did see them this way (this is clearly reflected in American cinema and other forms of popular culture like novels), and subsequently supported both domestic (McCarthyism) and foreign (Korea) anti-communist policies.

More seriously however, Rodwell's pronouncement that 'in Iraq the abuses of Iraqi prisoners are isolated cases' ignores the vast wealth of information that we now have of widespread and systematic abuses by American, British, Danish, and Coalition-trained Iraqi forces.[7] These studies (and presently ongoing trials) have convincingly demonstrated that these large-scale and systematic abuses of human rights, far from being aberrant or in any way exceptional, have instead been normalised and institutionalised in the day-to-day prosecution of the war on terrorism. More importantly, they clearly demonstrate that the abuses were the direct result of the discursive creation of a supreme and ubiquitous terrorist threat, combined with the demonisation of the evil terrorist 'other' and a range of institutional practices such as the hooding of prisoners. For example, the extreme forms of shackling seen in the photos of the initial Guantanamo Bay prisoners (in some cases, bound and shackled to gurneys, detainees were wheeled to interrogations) were justified on the grounds that these were such dangerous individuals that they had to be restrained in this fashion for the safety of those guarding them.[8] Earlier, President Bush's Military Order of November 13, 2001 proclaimed that detainees in the war on terrorism were not entitled to protection under the Geneva Conventions and would be tried under special military commissions because:

Individuals acting alone and in concert involved in international terrorism possess both the capability and the intention to undertake further terrorist attacks against the United States that, *if not detected and prevented, will cause mass deaths, mass injuries, and massive destruction of property*, and *may place at risk the continuity of the operations of the United States Government*. […] Having fully considered the magnitude of the potential deaths, injuries, and property destruction that would result from potential acts of terrorism against the United States , and the probability that such acts will occur, I have determined that *an extraordinary emergency exists* for national defence purposes…[9] (emphasis added.)

Later, in dozens of letters and memos regarding the treatment of prisoners, senior officials argue that 'the interrogation of such unlawful combatants in a manner *beyond that which may be applied to a prisoner of war* who is subject to the protections of the Geneva Conventions'[10] (emphasis added) will be allowable because:

al Qaeda has other sleeper cells within the United States that may be planning… to develop and *deploy chemical, biological and nuclear weapons of mass destruction*. Under these circumstances, a detainee may possess information that could enable the United States to prevent *attacks that potentially could equal or surpass the September 11 attacks in their magnitude*. Clearly, any harm that might occur during an interrogation would pale to insignificance compared to the harm avoided by preventing such an attack, which could take *hundreds or thousands of lives*.[11] (emphasis added.)

Apart from revealing how far the public language of the war on terrorism has permeated the institutions of government and state security, what these excerpts clearly demonstrate is how the discursive construction of the terrorist threat has been deployed to justify and normalise the systematic and institutional abuse of human rights. There is, in other words, a demonstrable link between the language and practice of the war on terrorism—between the discourse and the actual practice of counter-terrorism. This is an 'empirical' finding that Rodwell fails to properly engage with.

Having failed to deny explanatory value to my study, Rodwell then attempts to deny any moral force to critical normative evaluations of the conduct of the war on terror due to the (apparent) contradictions of a post-structuralist ethics.[12] Apart from failing to recognize that my approach is not strictly a post-structuralist one, but rather rooted in an explicitly normative Critical Theory framework, Rodwell once again fails to state how the problem of competing ethical frameworks is to be overcome. What criteria would he employ in the evaluation of the language and conduct of the war on terrorism? I would suggest that there exist a multitude of ways in which competing ethical systems can be distinguished and evaluated, from simple utilitarian calculations of the social good and social outcomes, to more abstract theories of justice and equality, or even sociological arguments about existing cultural values (such as the worldwide acceptance of universal human rights). Consequently, I am prepared to argue that we should always defend human rights against torture, accountability against impunity, democratic participation against the enforcement of exclusionary visions of national unity, the rule of law against dubious expediency, justice over injustice, cosmopolitanism over xenophobia, and human emancipation over free markets—among others.

In the end, failing to confront the critical moral and ethical issues raised by the conduct of the war on terrorism fails to acknowledge the underlying normative dimensions of the study of international relations: theory is always for someone and for something; objective or neutral social science is a fiction. Therefore, without an explicitly normative engagement with the issues of international (and domestic) politics, our scholarship risks legitimizing and reifying existing political structures and practices—even if unintentionally. As both citizens and scholars, we have a responsibility to act as constructive critics of domestic and foreign policies, to challenge the lies and obfuscations of those in power, and to work for positive social change.

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Notes

[1] See William Wallace, 'Truth and Power, Monks and Technocrats: Theory and Practice in International Relations', *Review of International Studies* 22 (1996), pp. 301-321.

[2] See for example, Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is What States Make of it', *International Organization* 46 (1992), pp. 391-425; David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, Revised edition, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

[3] N. Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 87.

[4] Damien Hodgson, *Discourse, Discipline and the Subject: A Foucauldian Analysis of the UK Financial Services Industry*, (Aldershot , UK : Ashgate, 2000), pp. 20-21.

[5] Whether or not it is really possible to walk the Constructivist tightrope between positivist and post-positivist social science is a debate I do not wish to engage in here; it has been vigorously argued elsewhere. It is sufficient for my purposes to suggest that critical discourse analysis can enhance our understanding of international politics, particularly if it is added to other structuralist and post-structuralist explanations.

[6] See for example, Rahul Mahajan, *Full Spectrum Dominance: U.S. power in Iraq and beyond* (New York : Seven Stories Press, 2003); Alex Callinicos, *The New Mandarins of American Power* (Cambridge : Polity Press, 2003); Carl Boggs, ed., *Masters of War: Militarism and Blowback in the Era of American Empire* (New York and London : Routledge, 2003). Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (London: Penguin Books, 2003); Dilip Hiro, *War Without End: The Rise of Islamic Terrorism and Global Response* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Aftab A. Malik, ed., *Shattered Illusions: Analyzing the War on Terrorism* (Bristol: Amal Press, 2002); Kenneth Booth and Timothy Dunne, eds., *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); R Burbach and B. Clarke, eds., *September 11 and the U.S.: Beyond the Curtain of Smoke* (San Francisco: City Lights Books and Freedom Voices Press, 2002).

[7] See The Depositions: The Prisoners Speak, Sworn Statements by Abu Grhaib Detainees; Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on the Treatment by the Coalition Forces of Prisoners of War and Other Protected Persons by the Geneva Conventions in Iraq During Arrest, Internment and Interrogation, February 2004; The Taguba Report; The Schlesinger Report; and the Fay/Jones Report in M. Danner, *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2004); D. Rose, *Guantanamo: America's War on Human Rights* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004); S. Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (London: Penguin, 2004); D. Cole, *Enemy Aliens: Double Standards and Constitutional Freedoms in the War on Terrorism* (New York: The New Press, 2003)—among many others.

[8] Rose, *Guantanamo* , p. 2.

[9] Military Order of November 13, 2001 , Detention, Treatment, and Trial of Certain Non-Citizens in the War Against Terrorism, in Danner, *Torture and Truth*, pp. 78-82.

[10] Pentagon Working Group Report, April 4, 2003 , in Danner, *Torture and Truth*, p. 188.

[11] Memo: Jay S. Bybee to Alberto Gonzales, August 1, 2002 , in Danner, *Torture and Truth*, pp. 150-51.

[12] It is not my place here to argue for a post-structuralist ethics; other more qualified individuals have already done so. See for example, D. Campbell and M. Shapiro, *Moral Spaces: Rethinking Ethics and World Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).