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Interview - Patrick Thaddeus Jackson

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Patrick Thaddeus Jackson (known fondly by students and colleagues as "PTJ") is renowned for his diverse body of scholarship in IR, ranging from understanding the philosophy of science wagers underpinning theory, to connecting IR and popular culture. He is perhaps best known for his 2011 book *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations*, which should be a staple of any IR graduate (or undergraduate) student's reading list. *Conduct of Inquiry* most recently won the 2013 International Studies Association Theory Section Book Award. Jackson is currently Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education and Professor of International Relations in the School of International Service at American University, and was named the U.S. Professor of the Year for the District of Columbia by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 2012. He served as President of the International Studies Association-Northeast in 2003-4 and in 2012-13. He is currently Series Editor of the University of Michigan Press' book series *Configurations: Critical Studies of World Politics*, as well as Co-Editor of International Studies Quarterly's ISQBlog. Dr. Jackson received his PhD in Political Science from Columbia University, and has also taught at Columbia and New York University.

In this interview, Professor Jackson discusses provincialism in U.S. IR theory, broadening theorists' understanding of truth and validity, sci-fi, and the influence of *Conduct of Inquiry* on the IR field.

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Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in contemporary IR?

The debates that I find the most interesting are the ones where people are taking insights that already exist and doing novel explanatory things with them. For instance, the practice turn is not new in a lot of ways—people have been talking about enacted social practice for a long time. What's interesting now is that people are trying to raise that to the level of being a "something," asking: what are the actual implications of enacted social practice? I think a lot of the "new hierarchy" stuff is very similar, where we have things that people had used before, other kinds of tools, but they're saying "all right, what can we actually do with this stuff now?"

I think the most exciting thing going on in IR is not necessarily one debate, but the tone or temperature of certain debates. There is a greater awareness that if we're going to actually be making claims about things, then we have to be *actually making claims* rather than simply engaging in theoretical in-fighting. I'm obviously a fan of big, broad definitions of what exactly it means to make claims, but I think there's some really interesting stuff going on across the board, as people start trying to be more precise about what the worldly insights are that their approaches generate. And of course that's something I'm involved in trying to push more of, so that's something I'm very happy to see going on.

I also think there's some really neat stuff starting to go on now in the global IR debates and discussions: what does IR look like in different parts of the world, what does it mean to have a form of international knowledge that doesn't look like a sub-field of American Political Science? I find that a really interesting set of questions. What does it mean to talk about a Chinese IR, an Indian IR—in what sense are those meaningful terms, what does that suggest? The attempt of the field to try to embrace its global character is really quite exciting.

What are the most important/interesting areas of IR theory that are underdeveloped today or understudied at the moment? Where is there most need and scope for new thinking?

A lot of new thinking, or at least a lot of revisiting, is required in some basic methodological questions. Think about the way in which the globalization of IR scholarship is framed—often it falls back to an unexamined, fairly neopositivist understanding of what theory is supposed to be. Opening that up a little bit would be useful. There's obviously a lot more work to be done in terms of issues, like what does it mean to have different forms of knowledge, and what are the standards appropriate to different kinds of knowledge? There has been some great feminist work on modes of knowing, different kinds of knowing from different kinds of perspectives. I think that's marvelous stuff. But again, what is needed is for other kinds of approaches that are not necessarily about women or gender to take some of those insights on board, and say "wait a minute, there's a sensibility here that we need to incorporate."

There are other ways in which these sorts of innovations should have implications not just for the study of particular topics, but for the study of a whole variety of things. I think a lot of it does go back to unexamined understandings of science, and validity, and truth, and so on, where we still haven't moved very far beyond this very tight circle of "bad Lakatos," basically. It comes in different flavors, but it's basically all kinds of bad Lakatosian progressivism. Moving beyond that, trying to think a little more thoroughly about what it means to produce knowledge in the first place. Analytical eclecticism in the Katzenstein and Sil sense nods in the right direction, but I don't think it gives us enough to go on. The point of that intervention, is to say "do multiple things." Now that we've gotten to that point, how do these multiple things cohere in some way? I think that is something that we really need to think more about. As I look around, that is an area that needs more theorizing, and it has relevance to the question of the globalization of IR, because if there really are different ways of constructing knowledge, that gives us some insight into the diversity of international knowledges.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Graduate school forms you into a particular kind of intellectual, whether you are aware of it or not. You spend a lot of time after graduate school recovering and trying to figure out what you were just part of. One of the things that my PhD training inscribed in me is a certain kind of U.S. provincialism, in terms of journals, and in terms of where interesting scholarship was happening and what interesting scholarship looked like. Though I was aware that my academic horizons were limited, I simply did not know anything else because I had never read it, it was never *there*. Things like the creation of the *European Journal of International Relations*, or the time that I was editor for the *Journal of International Relations and Development*—you come in contact with much more scholarship that is much broader, and that exposure was tremendously helpful.

There is a difference between knowing your own construal of the field is narrow, and actually realizing what its narrowness consists in: I had the first, but didn't have the second until I started talking to people like David Blaney, Naeem Inayatullah, Arlene Tickner about what's going on out there in the rest of the world, or really seriously engaging the work of feminists like Ann Tickner or Laura Sjoberg, and saying "here are different kinds of insights that other people actually are developing." Knowing what that development looks like gives me a better sense of how what I was doing was useful in its own little sphere, but that sphere has limits. Recognizing what those limits are by being brought into dialogue with these other approaches has been tremendously important for me.

Probably the most significant evolution in my thinking has to do with someone that I actually never read in graduate school, because nobody at Columbia when I was there seemed to know who Nick Onuf was, so nobody read Nick. It wasn't until afterwards that I started reading a lot of Nick's stuff, indeed all of Nick's stuff. It's not even that I agree with Nick on every point, but that the way Nick approaches theory gave me permission, if you will, to be that kind of theorist, and to just say "you know what? I'm not going to worry about intervention into some small disciplinary debate. I'm not really going to spend time thinking about how this maps on to existing patterns of IR scholarship."

Instead, there are fundamental issues, and I'm going to think about what the implications of those issues are. And that touches on, and has implications for, all of this stuff that we are doing in IR, but thinking of it as the IR stuff being

an *implication* of something else, rather than the argument itself. I probably learned that most directly from Nick Onuf's work. And that clearly is not the way that one is trained at Columbia as a PhD: one does not think of IR as a derived implication, you think of it as the starting point. Over the last decade and a half, I've thought myself into a place where I think about it much differently now. I don't start *from* IR; I start from other things and what I see in IR, the shape I think IR should have, is a consequence of those things.

Does the existence of the various discrete theoretical paradigms in IR (realism, liberalism, etc.) help explain international politics today, or do they, as some argue, largely talk past one another and therefore obscure more than they illuminate?

I would say no and no: I would not agree with either of those statements. I don't think they help very much, but I also don't think the problem is that they talk past each other.

I think the problem is that we in IR have a long-standing tendency to confuse substantive claims about the world with fundamental philosophical presuppositions about the world. These are not the same thing. Realism, liberalism, constructivism, etc. are pretty much on the same page when it comes to philosophical wagers about the world, because they all are generally engaged in doing the same kind of explanatory endeavor; they just make different kinds of guesses about the important factors (when I say constructivism here, I'm talking about mainstream US constructivism). So realists say "it's the material aspects of things," and liberals say "no, it's rational-tradeoffs," and constructivists say "no, it's ideas and norms that matter." That's a *really* small difference. Either that difference is a straight-forward set of empirical propositions that can be compared to one another—let's look at this particular case and see whether it was the ideas, or number of troops that the different actors had, and we can resolve that—or it's that each one of those has a piece of the puzzle. The answer is probably always going to be all of them—it's almost never going to be just one thing, but rather the combination of several of these things.

The weird halfway house that we have in the field now, these "paradigms," which as you might know is language that I'm not crazy about—Daniel Nexon and I have written lots of things saying "no, this doesn't make any sense. These aren't paradigms; they don't have fundamental epistemic incommensurability at their core." There is no reason why a realist, liberal, and constructivist of the mainstream type can't be talking directly to one another and giving different kinds of evidence in support of their claims, and this becomes a fairly straight-forward set of empirical arguments. The fact that we rely on bad Lakatos and bad Kuhn as ways of avoiding those discussions—by just saying, "oh, they're paradigms," as if that were a license for contradictory statements to be simultaneously maintained—that doesn't really advance much of anything. It is not that these things have to speak past each other, it's that we *make* them speak past each other by pretending that they're much more important than they are, that there are fundamental, irreconcilable differences between realism, liberalism, and constructivism and other kinds of mainstream "paradigms."

This does not apply when you are talking about something like the more European, critical style of constructivism, or certain kinds of Marxism and post-colonial critique that really take structure seriously in a very different kind of way. Then you are getting closer to talking about approaches that actually do have fundamental differences. And it's not the empirics that are fundamentally different, it's the approach to theory and theorizing that is different. Then you rise close to the level of what one might sensibly call a paradigm or a research program. That distinction is not very well understood, and I tend not to like the "paradigm" language because I think people collapse that back into the "isms" language. I think what I would rather say is that what obscures things is the misuse of these philosophy of science notions. If we were clearer about what we mean, then we would have more productive dialogues, and more productive tensions, across these different ways of generating knowledge about the world. That, I think, would be a very positive development, but I have no idea whether it is actually going to happen.

Your book, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations*, calls for scientific pluralism in the IR discipline, which at least in the U.S. is currently dominated by the neopositive approach. Do you see an opening in the field towards alternative methodologies, either currently or in the future?

It makes a difference whether we are talking about the U.S. discipline or the global field, and I would actually

differentiate and use the words “discipline” and “field” in that way. In the U.S., the fundamental institutional fact about IR, that cannot be overplayed, is that in most places it is constituted as a sub-discipline of Political Science. Most IR people in the United States are employed by Political Science departments. As a standard, day-to-day, practical matter, that means in order to get hired, tenured, and promoted, they are going to have to be able to convince their other colleagues who are in other sub-disciplines of Political Science that the work they are doing passes muster and meets a certain sort of standard. When you look at the shape of U.S. Political Science, which perhaps understandably is somewhat dominated by Americanists—it is U.S. Political Science, after all—it tends to be fairly methodologically homogenous. There is definitely a strong institutionalized preference for a certain kind of nomothetic hypothesis-testing, particularly with quantitative application. That is what one gets in a basic Political Science methodology course. There is a great survey that Peregrine Schwartz-Shea did a few years ago about PhD programs in Political Science in the United States, and the one constant factor she was able to find across them was Statistics classes. And that’s fascinating—it wasn’t a scope and methods, it wasn’t a theory of politics, it certainly wasn’t a philosophy of science class—it was Statistics. And that tells you something about the shape of the discipline of Political Science in the United States, because IR is constituted as a sub-field of that discipline. That really limits the amount of space that there is within the U.S. academy, simply because of everyday practical matters of hiring and promotion and peer review, and so on.

If we shift our gaze and look outside the United States, then we see all kinds of interesting openings, because outside of the U.S., a lot of IR programs are not constituted as sub-fields of Political Science and don’t necessarily operate on the same kinds of methodological strictures. You have free-standing IR programs, you have IR programs that have closer ties to history, the humanities–IR that works in very different kinds of ways than in the U.S. That is not to say that it’s entirely different, but that that added institutional burden of having to interact on a daily basis with one’s neopositivst Political Science colleagues is not necessarily as strong. So I think there’s a lot of space if you look globally. And because the U.S. academy is so big, there’s even some space for people to not be doing the standard thing in the U.S., outside of the major mainstream Political Science departments. It matters that some of those U.S.-based folks are able to do professional credentialing of themselves by publishing in non-U.S. outlets. I think that’s an important and really interesting space. So I think that, globally, there is a lot of opening and diversity, but that does not necessarily translate into openness within the mainstream U.S. academy in particular.

What implications might *Conduct of Inquiry* have for teaching and learning in IR?

I would suggest that there are two implications. First, it is important for students of IR to be at least minimally conversant in some of these philosophy of science, design of research, philosophy of inquiry issues. We need to make sure that students—particularly PhD students, but I would say even undergraduate students—come to understand that factual knowledge claims are not simply the kinds of things that fall out of the internet when you Google them. They don’t just show up as finished claims; there’s a process involved in making these claims, and that process is diverse. There are a lot of different ways that one can construct knowledge, which means that if someone makes a claim about world politics—if we reach for a question like “is that claim true?”—that doesn’t shut down the discussion, it shapes it. Because now it pushes us into a discussion of what are the different criteria and validity to hash out this particular statement.

Take your standard policy statement—it’s a good idea to go to war with this particular country preemptively—well, what does that mean? Does it mean that in general these kinds of things work out? Does it mean in this particular case, because of case-specific factors, this makes sense? Does it mean given our other options this is the least-bad one? There are a number of different ways to cash this out and they do not all look the same. How one chooses to cash these out is going to affect one’s evaluation of whether the claim is “true.” So the primary implication for teaching and learning is that we need to focus more on helping students to realize that how one chooses to evaluate a claim is not a simple and straight-forward matter.

The other implication, related to the scientific pluralism that I try to advocate throughout the book, is that it is useful to know other philosophical languages and registers than one’s own, largely because it helps you realize where your own limitations are. Sometimes there is a presupposition in these discussions that thinking about questions of research design and methodology will necessarily lead to one unified standard that everyone can adhere to. No! The

last time that people tried to have one single unified standard was the Popperian falsification criterion, but that didn't really work and so most philosophers of science abandoned it as a way of categorically distinguishing between science and non-science. It's a term you can conjure with, but it does not necessarily give you direct orders as to where the line is between "what is science" and "what is not." If you turn the clock back a bit further, this is the Vienna Circle project: let's come up with universal standards that exemplify what scientific knowledge is. It didn't work. And that's important that it didn't work, because these were really smart folks and they couldn't do it, and they all went off in different directions trying to put the project back together again after they realized that it wasn't working properly. Given that, we should not go into these discussions assuming that they are going to result in some single, universal standard. Sometimes the thing you learn in a contentious conversation is just what the limits of your own positions are within that field of contestation, and that's a perfectly reasonable outcome.

So the first implication that I hope my book will have would be that we should talk more about the different kinds of standards that one uses to evaluate claims. The second implication would be that we should abandon, or at least seriously downplay, the expectation that our different kinds of research on IR or world politics are going to add up to one single, consistent thing. It might not, and that's okay.

Some argue that the practice of IR is much like the rest of the human experience—the rise in the study of emotions and sociological concepts used to study IR may be seen as evidence of this. To what extent do you think it is helpful to conceive of IR in this manner?

It would be a lie for me to say I have always thought about IR as a certain kind of subset of the human experience. When I went to graduate school, I was impressed with the idea that IR is a particular subfield of Political Science. The way I would tend to define it now, the core of IR is the study of the encounter of difference across boundaries. I have a hard time imagining things that couldn't in some way be IR, as long as we're focusing on that "encounter-across-boundaries" dimension of it.

One of the great things about being a book series editor is that I get to see book proposals when they are in their early stages of formation, as people are just kind of throwing ideas around. I've seen proposals where people are playing seriously with, for example, "what does it mean to encounter the non-human in politics?" That's cool—that's IR, because it asks "where are the boundary lines? Where does the 'human' stop? How do we deal with drones, how do we deal with animals, how do we deal with the environment? What does it mean to encounter the planet? What are the implications of the different ways that we configure the encounter with the non-human?"

And of course my work on sci-fi: this is one of the things that I'm endlessly fascinated by—the alien encounter—because in many ways I think that IR is about alien encounter, so let's look at the different ways that people tease this out in different science fiction formats. In that sense, I think that the subject matter of IR is, at least in principle, co-equal with the human experience. Again, it's about what one chooses to focus on, what aspect of the human experience one chooses to focus on.

I also think that IR isn't a discipline, but an inter-disciplinary field, because our subject matter is so big and broad. A lot of different insights from a lot of different academic disciplines can be brought in and incorporated if we give them the twist that makes them about this encounter-and-boundaries kind of problematique.

Psychologists and other sorts of folks have been working on emotion for a long time. What's interesting now about the "emotion turn" within IR is that people are saying "actually, these emotional registers are pretty relevant to these questions about how we encounter one another, and how we encounter things, and where we draw boundary lines, and what we think are legitimate courses of action, and so on." The way that everyone seemed to be fascinated by micro-economics for the last thirty years—well, we learned some stuff there, now let's bring some other analytics in. There's nothing in IR that would say you can't do that, and that's one of the neat things about it as an inter-disciplinary meeting space. Anything, pretty much, as long as you can find that encounter-and-boundary dynamic in it some place. The study of popular culture in IR I think makes perfect sense, because we've got the circulation of the ways in which people have conceptualized these problems of encounter-and-boundary, and discovery, and so on. So I think it's probably more about the inter-disciplinary character of IR than anything else.

Considering the recent appointment of several theory-minded scholars to high-level positions, what do you think about the state of the job market for IR theorists? Do you see the market as opening up to more theoretical or interpretive scholars, and if so, do you think *Conduct of Inquiry* has played a role in facilitating this opening?

I would hope that it did, but I have no way of knowing that it did. Most of the reports that I've had where people have found the book useful have been graduate students grappling with questions of how do they design their research, and how to respond to certain kinds of neopositivist criticisms of what they're doing. So I've gotten a lot of great feedback on that score.

I'd love it if the book had also helped to create a vocabulary that people might use in hiring decisions. I think that would be awesome, actually. I'll go back to what I said before about the split between the United States and the rest of the world: high-profile appointments of IR theorists, at least in my sense of it is, they have been happening more outside the U.S. I think that's great, I think it's wonderful that people are taking theory seriously, but I contrast that in the U.S. with some Political Science departments down-playing, or even eliminating, their theory sections. So there's a double movement going on here in curious ways.

I think, or hope, that what people discover in the U.S. is that theory is more appealing as a subject to teach than certain kinds of very technical study-of-politics stuff. Especially in places that have pronounced commitments to undergraduate education, you want theorists, because you want people who think broadly about world politics, and you want people that are interested in helping students to think broadly about world politics. And so there's an elective affinity, if you want to be very Weberian about it, between theory and that kind of undergraduate, liberal arts teaching in particular. And the cases that I know of where IR theorists have gotten decent jobs in the U.S. recently have been at places where that's a concern, where there was a teaching component to it, the mission of the institution was about that kind of education. I think that's significant and important.

I don't know about the market—first of all, I'm not entirely sure we have a market. We have a bunch of people trying to get jobs, but that doesn't necessarily make a market; there's far too little consistency across negotiations, I think, for it to be called a market. It's more of a social grab-bag, a strange network. But the advice I will often give my students who are more theoretically inclined is that if you want to be doing work that is broader than the mainstream of the U.S. discipline, then you need to keep your options open and look outside the U.S. as well, in terms of job placements. The U.S. is so big that sometimes things happen—it's just such a big system of higher education that sometimes people get jobs that you wouldn't necessarily have thought, because there are just so many positions around—less so now, now that you have the temping and adjunctification of so much of higher ed, with the cutting of budgets and all of these sorts of other things going on. Although that's not specific to Political Science or IR, that's in general about the way the universities are trying to manage things now. I don't know that being a theorist makes you any more of a liability in a market like that, or a system like that, but I don't think it's an advantage either. But I do think that if we stress this affinity between theory and a certain kind of engagement with graduate teaching, there's good potential there.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of IR?

For undergrads, my first advice is don't go to graduate school to get a PhD unless you've decided that you can't be happy doing anything else. This is like seminary: you go to this because you're called, you go to this because you don't have a choice; literally, if you didn't do it, it would tear you up inside. You need to have a passionate desire to know about this stuff. If these sets of theoretical issues actually bother you and keep you awake at night—then cool, you are the person we need. You have no choice. You have to come into the academy. Then you're locked in here with the rest of us, and we'll have to train you and work to get you a job that will pay you enough to eat. But I would say to the undergraduate student: if you're just interested in the subject matter, then there are a bunch of other things that you could do with your life that don't necessarily involve expanding our knowledge of the subject matter. Make that decision first. If you're just interested in IR, say you're really passionate about development issues, great—but before you decide that a PhD in IR is what you're looking for, go work at a development organization. Go work at an NGO doing development work and see if that is where you feel called to be. If it is, and if it gratifies you,

excellent—the world needs lots of those people. If you go and there's something missing, people aren't talking about Wittgenstein enough or whatever, then you know what? Okay, sorry, you've got the bug—you're stuck, we're going to have to take you back. So the advice I'd give to the undergrad is, be careful not to confuse the scholarly vocation with the interest in the subject, that these are two different things, and be clear where you are before you commit to an academic career.

If you're already in a PhD program, then there are two pieces of advice I would give you. One of them goes back to the provincialism thing: U.S. doctoral training is often very provincial. Make sure that you are plugged into things that are going on outside of those networks: attend conferences in other countries, read websites in other languages. Look at what people are doing in the study of world politics outside of your normal networks, and try to concretely encounter some of that, and engage it in your own work as much as possible, even if your advisors are telling you, "this is peripheral, this isn't really the important stuff." They may not think it is the important stuff—it may not be the important stuff—but there's something very powerful about looking outside of what you think is important, so that you can explore the boundaries of that sense that you have that "this is the important stuff." Beware of the quick answer. Figure out why there are a whole bunch of people in the world that study this topic in a very different way than we do. Push yourself to be able to do that.

The other piece of advice would be to make sure that the topics you're working on are the topics you actually have a burning need to know about. Resist the temptation to do the easy thing in your doctoral work, which is find a nice little niche in the discipline and fit yourself into a little corner somewhere. Especially don't do that if you think it is going to guarantee you a job, because it doesn't. If at the end of the day this is not an intellectual endeavor, where you are not centrally involved in feeding yourself intellectually, the extrinsic rewards are not large enough to justify the commitment. It has to be the intrinsic rewards. Go with the thing that you're actually passionately interested in, because that is what carries you through.

To the young scholar, the primary thing I would say is: have you thought about other countries? The "market" is global now, the system of job employment is global, and there are lots of interesting opportunities that are not here, wherever "here" happens to be. Obviously people make employment decisions based on a lot of factors. But if one is trying to think about getting a job doing this very strange thing that we do—thinking about stuff and teaching students about it, and sometimes writing it down—then I think one needs to be pretty broad and flexible about where exactly you're going to ply that trade. After all, there are a lot of places in the world in which there are academies with people who are doing work on world politics, and some of them may even be more intellectually congenial than the place that you've probably been socialized to think of as the place where you should be employed. Don't be too fixated on just that specific thing, since there are other opportunities out there. Hopefully by passing through the undergrad and PhD process yourself, and you've come to the realization that this is in fact a vocation, then you will find a place to exercise it. It may not look exactly like what you thought it was going to, or what your advisors thought it was going to, or what your peers think it is going to, but you're going to find some place. Because if it is that central to who you are as a scholar then you can't give that up; it would be like giving up your skin, your organs. If it's in your soul, it's in your soul, and then you'll find some way to actually do things that feed it.

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This interview was conducted by Alex Stark. Alex is a Director of E-IR's editorial board. She is a PhD student in International Relations at Georgetown University. Luke Herrington, an Editor-at-Large for E-IR, also contributed.