This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

# Review – Whiskey & International Relations Theory

https://www.e-ir.info/2021/04/21/review-whiskey-international-relations-theory/

FILIPE DOS REIS AND ADHEMAR MERCADO, APR 21 2021

***Whiskey & International Relations Theory***
**By Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel Nexon**
**Podcast, ongoing since 5 February 2020**

'Welcome to *Whiskey & International Relations*, where two middle-aged academics drink whiskey and talk about IR theory; it really is just what the title says'. This is how episode 9 of the podcast*Whiskey & International Relations Theory* starts. The podcast is produced by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, two of the most prolific scholars in North American International Relations (IR) theory. They established the podcast in early 2020 to complement more practice-driven IR podcasts, such as *Un-diplomatic*, with a theory-oriented alternative. However, the start of the podcast turned out to be very timely for a well-known reason: While*Whiskey & International Relations Theory* was launched pre-pandemic, episode 3 was already recorded under lockdown. Since then, most of our teaching, research and life has turned (largely) online. Blogs, video calls, online seminars and podcasts have become second skin, and have turned into core resources for the move to remote education, collaboration and communication. For sure, attempts to establish online platforms for IR scholars, students and practitioners are far from new – and both Jackson and Nexon have been among the pioneers in the field. Nexon, for example, is the founder of The Duck of Minerva, which has become one of the most successful IR blogs.

For more than two decades, both convenors have published extensively on IR theory, often in collaboration. Their joint contributions include work on relationalism and attempts to map recent developments in IR theory (see, for example, Jackson and Nexon 1999; 2009). The idea behind *Whiskey & International Relations Theory* is to continue this conversation. The podcast (re)introduces some classical books and articles in IR theory, and provides a platform for recent debates. Fifteen episodes have been published as of February 2021, covering a diverse range of authors and contributions, such as Kenneth Waltz (ep. 1-2), Cynthia Enloe (ep. 3-4), Alexander Wendt (ep. 5-6), Yaqin Qin (ep. 7-8), John Ruggie (ep. 11), Susan Strange (ep. 12), David Campbell (ep. 13-14), and J. Ann Tickner (ep. 15) as well as the debate on 'Race and Securitization Theory' (ep. 9-10). As addressing all episodes would exceed this short review, we focus on Jackson and Nexon's exemplary discussions of one monograph – Kenneth Waltz's*Theory of International Politics* – and the ad hoc panel on 'Race and Securitization Theory'. We believe these four episodes encapsulate well the strengths and weaknesses of the podcast as well as its potentialities to approach complex and contentious debates.

## Learning from the Past: Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*

The first two episodes cover Kenneth Waltz's 1979 monograph *Theory of International Politics*. Why did Jackson and Nexon start their podcast with Waltz? As they argue at the beginning of the first episode, 'Waltz is to IR, what Talcott Parsons is to sociology: it is pretty difficult to understand what happened in the field […] without understanding *Theory of International Politics*' (ep. 1, at 9:40). However, despite its canonical status, Waltz's contribution figures usually as a strawman, and there are actually not so many 'Waltzians' in the field. Moreover, as Jackson and Nexon claimed in an earlier publication, 'Waltz's approach to theory and theorizing was grossly misunderstood' (Jackson and Nexon 2013, 15, emphasis in the original). The podcast therefore presents an opportunity to revisit, reread and reinterpret *Theory of International Politics*. After short and concise lectures on the author and context of the book, Jackson and Nexon carefully introduce and discuss each of the nine chapters. It is here where one of the biggest

strengths of the podcast plays out as they reconstruct the main arguments of Waltz in dialogue with each other. Their discussion operates mainly on the level of internal critique. Jackson and Nexon seek to present a 'fair' assessment of Waltz's work, including its flaws and contradictions, but also highlight its contributions to anchoring debates about *theory* – and the broader philosophy of social science – in the core of IR. Jackson and Nexon do a very good job in showing how the text shaped them as scholars and the field of IR more generally. This self-reflexive dialogue makes the podcast particularly interesting from an educational perspective as it provides a window into processes behind the published article and shows how ideas grow and change over time. The episode then concludes by situating the book in the context of more recent developments in international affairs such as US-China relations.

**Engaging with the Present: The Debate on *Race and Securitization Theory***

The flexible nature of podcasts, with their low production cost, quick turnaround, wide outreach and the possibility of inviting other guests and experts to join, make them ideal to engage and participate in ongoing debates. Breaking with their usual format of discussing classics, episodes 9 and 10 are a good example of the medium's possibilities to approach current issues and debates within IR. Built around the conversation between Jackson, Nexon and their three guests Jarrod Hayes, Nawal Mustafa and Robbie Shilliam, the two episodes present a timely and nuanced discussion and analysis of the so-called securitization and racism debate. The debate was triggered by an initial article in *Security Dialogue*, accusing securitization theory of being intrinsically racist, and the ensuing replies in the same journal as well as fallouts on different social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. The podcast format allows the discussion to escape the superficial and limiting 280-character disputes on Twitter, thus providing a refreshing change of pace. Jackson, Nexon, and their guests are able to slowly work through the articles and, perhaps more importantly, engage with the underlying discussions and issues.

Episode 9 starts with a reconstruction of the debate, highlighting some of the core issues to help better understand the tensions and fallout. This is then followed by short interventions by the three guests, with each one offering further background by situating the conversations within wider traditions of thought. This is important as North American IR theory scholars appear not to be too familiar with both securitization theory and critical race theory. Shilliam elaborates on anti-racist thought, in particular on the diverse and fractal nature of the Black radical tradition and emphasizes the importance of generosity in academic debates. Hayes contextualizes securitization theory, including its attempt to de-essentialize the concept of security, and discusses how it helps us to understand constructions of 'normal' politics. This is complemented by Mustafa, a former PhD student turned anti-racist activist, who reflects on the nexus between academia and activism and the risk of depoliticizing Black radical traditions of thought. These contributions allow the podcast to set itself apart from what was becoming a very partisan debate. By situating the accusations raised against securitization theory within its evolution and wider discussions on race, white supremacy, anti-racist activism, the conversation between Jackson, Nexon, Shilliam, Mustafa and Hayes is able to move beyond the shortcomings of the initial piece and its responses. The interventions propose and perform generosity, highlight the importance of academic standards and invite us to engage with a much-needed conversation on race and racism within IR theorizing. Yet, they also point to the responsibilities of journal editors and the pitfalls and dangers of social media in academic debates.

**Conclusion: Looking into the Future**

In conclusion, *Whiskey & International Relations Theory* presents – from the perspective of IR *theory* – an important addition to existing publication channels. Of course, a podcast has its benefits and pitfalls and those need to be taken into consideration. A podcast should neither be seen as a replacement for established channels nor as a solution to all the problems of academia. For instance, a thorough engagement with the original texts through reading and in-class discussion remains essential. In the future, with further proliferation of this format, there might also be the danger that podcasts with lower quality might emerge where students might face difficulties in evaluating them. However, we believe that the podcast makes an important contribution in two regards: addressing the issue of canon formation and making IR theory accessible. First, the high quality of the podcast is not only due to the well-established interplay between the two convenors but also to their attempt to stretch the canon of IR theory. It is important to acknowledge here that the podcast's primary audience is located within North American IR. What might be at the margins of North American IR might be more acknowledged in other parts of the world, and vice versa. Yet,

we nevertheless believe that the podcast is of interest also for European and non-Western audiences. Importantly, the question of audience also touches the politics of canon formation in the discipline. We concur with the convenors that it is necessary to revisit the classics here and there.

We also agree that IR theory has by now a wide range of classics, not only in what is usually considered as 'the mainstream' but also within its more 'critical' corners. While it might sound promising, particularly from a critical perspective, to leave the classics behind, this might also come with the danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater and producing a discipline without any (loose) sense of tradition or core as a common site for debates. In the end, no one can escape the politics of canon formation – this includes by now also feminist or decolonial thought in IR. Rather, it seems important to us to reflect on the politics of canon formation and how every (new) canon excludes and includes, and produces (new) hierarchies and silences. Finally, from an *educational* point of view, we believe that the podcast with its detailed analysis and contextualization of the different texts discussed is very suitable for hybrid teaching because it provides a good introduction to advanced theories of International Relations for both graduate and undergraduate students. As such, *Whiskey & International Relations Theory* also presents a significant effort to break down the paywall in global education.

**Bibliography**

Jackson, Patrick Thaddeus, and Daniel H. Nexon. 1999. 'Relations Before States: Substance, Process and the Study of World Politics'. *European Journal of International Relations* 5 (3): 291–332.

———. 2009. 'Paradigmatic Faults in International-Relations Theory'. *International Studies Quarterly* 53 (4): 907–30.

———. 2013. 'I Can Has IR Theory?' *The Duck of Minerva Working Paper* 1.2013.

---

## About the author:

Filipe dos Reis is Assistant Professor in the Department of International Relations and International Organization at the University of Groningen. He holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of Erfurt, where he also worked as a research associate. His current research focuses on the history and politics of international law, imperial Germany, and maps. He is co-editor (with Zeynep Gulsah Capan and Maj Grasten) of The Politics of Translation in International Relations (2021, Palgrave Macmillan) and (with Luis Lobo-Guerrero and Laura Lo Presti) of*Mapping, Connectivity and the Making of European Empires* (forthcoming, Rowman & Littlefield).

Adhemar Mercado is Lecturer in the Department of International Relations and International Organisations at the University of Groningen. He completed his PhD in International Relations at Aberystwyth University in Wales. His research focuses on Indigenous and social movements in Latin America and postcolonial and decolonial approaches to International Relations.