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# Culture and Otherness in Principal-Agent Theory

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# INTRODUCTION

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This symposium invites reflections on Eric Rittinger’s article “Arming the Other: American Small Wars, Local Proxies, and the Social Construction of the Principal-Agent Problem” (2017). Rittinger seeks to combine insights from rationalist principal-agent theory with the dynamics of identity relations as investigated principally by constructivist scholars, and to utilize this combination as a way of explaining variations in how the United States recruited and managed local actors to fight its wars by proxy. As such his article aims to make both a theoretical and an empirical contribution.

Empirically, Rittinger argues that how the United States recruited and utilized local proxies depended on the particular way that the “otherness” of those proxies was understood. Accounts of selves and others shaped the strategies that the U.S. put in place, and those strategies cannot be explained without paying careful attention to the narratives of difference that he locates in the archival material he utilizes. In particular, Rittinger argues, *changing* characterizations of local proxies—as either biologically or culturally flawed—led to different interpretations of the potential problems in controlling those proxies, and thus led officials to adopt different approaches to mitigating those problems, ranging from outright paternalism to less direct tutelage.

Theoretically, Rittinger rethinks principal-agent theory through a broadly constructivist lens. The problem of managing agents who have been retained in order to carry out the principal’s task is Rittinger’s point of departure, but he does not follow a rationalist road from that point. Instead of looking to ex ante specifications of strategic interests and deriving potential solutions from there, he examines the ways that situated social actors conceptualized and enframed the situations in which they found themselves, and use those narratives as the basis for his analysis. In this way, the piece also explores the persistence of techniques of marginalization even as foreign fighters are acting on behalf of a patron state. These cultural aspects of war shape the ways that violence is practiced in a stratified, hierarchal international arena.

In his contribution to this symposium, Tarak Barkawi argues that Rittinger does not go far enough in a sociological direction. Barkawi suggests that Rittinger focuses too much on the unidirectional construction *of* the local proxies *by* the United States, and as such does not sufficiently get away from the essentialist framing of orthodox principal-agent theory. By contrast, Srdjan Vucetic suggests that Rittinger’s article opens new vistas in the study of “racialized security contracting,” and wonders about Rittinger’s dichotomy of biological versus cultural alterity. Alexandra Gheciu concurs, and argues that it might be more productive to think of these as *competing* discourses of alterity, and to trace actual policy outcomes to the dynamics of that competition. Rittinger then responds to his interlocutors.

# ON CONSTRUCTION AND CONSTITUTION

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Tarak Barkawi  
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Eric Rittinger's well-constructed article brings constructivism into conversation with rationalist principal-agent theory. He argues that relations between principal and agent are historically and sociologically constructed, rather than given by rationalist presuppositions of goal incongruity. He uses cases of armed proxies or "foreign troops" to develop his constructivist version of principal-agent theory.

The article is about principal-agent theory, with the United States' experience of arming proxies serving as illustrative case material. It attempts to reconcile opposing epistemologies, or at least place them in a common analytic frame. But Rittinger's effort to reconceive principal-agent relations as co-constituted historically and sociologically fails. It does so because principal-agent theory conceives of the principal and the agent as distinct, essentialized entities, in this case the United States, on the one hand, and the foreign troops it delegates security responsibilities to, on the other. I will show how co-constitution disappears to be replaced by a "discourse-projecting principal" (the U.S.) and an agent (foreign troops) ironically deprived of agency (400).

Rittinger begins with an empirical question: "why has the U.S. approach to enlisting proxies varied so dramatically, from commanding them with its own officers to socializing them so as to obviate the need for such close oversight?" (396). From the outset, ahistorical presuppositions shape the argument. Historically speaking, we would expect that methods of constituting armed forces abroad would vary according to time and place. Just how and why these methods vary remains an interesting question, but that they vary should not in itself be surprising. The surprise arises from the "static" character of principal-agent theory, which assumes the principal and agent have incongruous interests or goals (397). Principals and agents are distinct corporate entities of some kind, each with their own (material or constructed) interests.

What Rittinger shows in the article is that U.S. officials characterized their proxies in four different ways over time, for example as racially inferior or potentially redeemable through tutelage. These different characterizations led them to adopt different modalities of constituting force, directly raising and officering foreign troops or only training and assisting them. Rittinger's point is that these different characterizations had social and historical sources, and that therefore the form the principal-agent problem took varied historically. Different historical discourses (e.g. scientific racism or human rights) constituted the principal's outlook on the agent, and shaped how the principal sought to manage the agent. Here Rittinger makes the "standard" constructivist maneuver in IR: he shows how the interests of the principal are constructed rather than read off material self-interest (397). He seeks to revise principal-agent theory with a layer of construction, proposing a constructivist version attentive to the social and historical knowledges principals use to identify and manage agents (396).

This move introduces a critical slippage in Rittinger's approach to principal-agent relations. What is constructed is the U.S. characterization of the agent, which then shapes how that agent is managed. What I think Rittinger wanted to argue was that the relations themselves were historically co-constituted. Instead, he essentializes principals and agents.

Moreover, in Rittinger's account, there is no allowance for the constructions of the agent. He makes no allowance for different historical discourses among the armed proxies themselves. It is the principal, not the agent, which draws on social knowledges. So for example, if black or brown troops are regarded as racially inferior by the principal, they are to be managed by white officers who directly command them (400-402). Unexplored here is how the black or brown troops regarded their situation and their white overlords, and how these constructions shaped any relations they had with their putative principals. We are left to assume that the discourses of scientific racism which informed the perspectives of the American officials and officers somehow worked, that they were socially efficacious in constituting armed forces.

But even in colonial armies directly officered by Westerners, indigenous sub-officers played important roles both in formal military terms and as intermediaries and informants. Indigenous recruits managed and manipulated the often clueless Westerners, for example by playing to racial stereotype to secure acceptance or promotion (Barkawi 2017: ch.2). The constructions and subjectivities of both the Westerners and the indigenous troops shaped the social and political character of the armed force. A co-constitutive account requires not only the constructions of both sides but the interactions between them.

Rittinger wants a "profoundly sociological" principal-agent theory (397, quoting Shapiro), but the rationalist assumption that principals and agents have a prior existence ambushes him. To shift languages somewhat, a properly sociological approach to patron-client relations shows how the "patron" and the "client" come into existence in and through their relations with one another. The relations are constitutive of the nature and character of the entities concerned. That is what the language of "co-constitution" seeks to capture. Instead, Rittinger makes reductive moves to engage with principal-agent theory. Social construction becomes about ideas only, the linguistic dimensions of discourse. Sociological, in Rittinger's hands, does not involve economic, political and social conditions broadly conceived, but rather the ways in which United States officials discursively constructed its armed proxies. Did they regard them as backward peoples in need of modernization, or as potential sources of human rights abuses?

Since the only constructions that matter for Rittinger are those held by the principal, in this case United States officials, we are left, however unintentionally, with a Western great power that has various demeaning views about foreigners and makes history on its own. Lost in this constructivist turn to principal-agent theory are the very international relations of co-constitution that should be the focus of IR. Essentialism and constitution are not compatible.

I close with two points about the international constitution of force obscured by essentializing principals and agents, but revealed by a properly constitutive analysis. From 1757 to 1947, British world and military power was not separate from its Indian involvements. What "Britain" was, at the height of its power, was partially Indian. This is true whether one is looking at the composition of military forces or economic or cultural relations. Inquiry into just how they were co-constituted, with what effects and change over time, is misdirected by presupposing the principal has a separate, corporate existence.

Relations between colonizer, army, and society, aided by the shock of the Second World War, ultimately undid British power in India. Indian peasants, soldiers, and anti-colonial activists, as well as British officers and officials, and others, played active roles in these histories, as did famine and the price of grain. Understanding the social basis of international forms of military power requires looking at this transnational context.

Consider the entwined military, social, political, and cultural histories of America and Vietnam. South Vietnamese peasants and officers made these histories along with their American counterparts, even as they did so from subordinate positions.

To be sure, raising these last points is to move away from Rittinger's article. He is clear that his interest is in developing constructivist principal-agent theory rather than exploring armed proxies *per se*. What is interesting to me is how questions that ought to be front and center for those interested in international military relations recede in favor of a focus on a universal political science theory applicable to electoral behavior as well as relations between states. What kind of theory might we come up with in IR if we spent more time attending to histories and sociologies of international relations, of the kind Rittinger uses for his case material?

# PROBLEMATIZING THE PRINCIPAL-AGENT PROBLEM, IR EDITION

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Srdjan Vucetic  
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How do we get them to fight and die for us? This question has been at the core of U.S. foreign and security policymaking since the beginning of the republic. It has also been one of the core questions in the critical scholarship on this subject since at least W.E.B. Du Bois' never published "The Black Man and the Wounded World."

To explain the nature of, and evolution in, U.S. policies towards its armed proxies, Rittinger develops a "constructivist principal-agent theory" that treats said policies as a function of Self-Other relations from the perspective of the principal qua Self. He evaluates his framework in a set of historical case studies. At the time when agents could only be constructed as biologically inferior, as the Filipinos, Haitians and Dominicans were during the Spanish-American War, Washington managed them via "paternalism." Once the discourses of identity purveyed by the U.S. state and society began to configure such agents as "merely" culturally inferior, as in the period after World War II, Washington switched to "tutelage" strategies, whether "in the field or in the classroom." In each case, rather than some objective foreign policy rationality, it was the dominant interpretation of the "agency problem" that drove U.S. strategy. Rittinger looks at the Trump era, too. Now that "the U.S.'s Muslim proxies" are again being constructed as different "beyond culture," U.S. strategy vis-à-vis its proxies no longer centers on "liberal socialization under American tutelage." The author sees this as having policy implications. The agency problem related to Muslim Otherness makes localization of U.S. wars in Muslim-majority countries and regions less likely. It also solidifies the principal's tendency to put "stabilocracy" before liberal democracy.

I praised Rittinger's article on social media when it first came out, and my reaction is the same upon the second reading of it. What better way to engage the economics-worshipping International Relations (IR) mainstream than by saddling one of its work-horses, the principal-agent theory, with historical and social context, identity, and discourse? Purists will no doubt protest, but rather than engaging those, the author's primary target are fellow constructivists who need to think harder about questions of racialized violence and of racialized international hierarchy. Indeed, these questions are only now coming to the theoretical forefront, even after a quarter century of constructivist thinking on these questions in *ISQ* alone (1).

This point leads me to my first question for the author: what is the value added/subtracted of binarizing the agent's alterity in terms of nature versus culture? Conceptualizing these as variable "sources" of the agent's (un)reliability and (dis)loyalty, the author follows Elezar Barkan and John Hobson, who both talk about a mid-twentieth century shift "from race to culture" in Anglo-America. While I am not denying that such a shift occurred and that representations of similarity/difference and of human hierarchy through nature, biology, and/or genetics became more and more illegitimate over time, I am inclined to think the nature-culture difference is one of degree, not kind (see Hobson 2012).

If this is right, then we might be looking at the world of racialized security contracting that is always primarily defined by what Rittinger calls paternalism. Related, the “retreat of scientific racism” notwithstanding, racism has since kept coming back even in science (Kohn 1995), to say nothing of politics. Perhaps those “small wars” are one reason why? Aimé Césaire certainly thought so. As a thought experiment, then, is it even possible to raise, train and arm foreign forces in the modern era, without contributing to a racialized world order in one form or another?

Let me also sneak in a methodological evergreen: how do we set out to know, first, which discourses prevailed in a given context, and, two, which rhetorical resources provided by those discourses resonated with policymakers? Suppose I was interested to see if Rittinger’s theory travels to other contexts and, e.g., explain the status of Gurkhas in today’s security environments or look at the reasons why the Indian president’s bodyguards are always limited to members of three groups, while a third of India’s army officers hail from just four to five states, what combination of primary and secondary sources would I have to use to estimate the principal’s definitions of reliability and loyalty? (2)

One key strength of Rittinger’s article is that it makes us think of new research avenues, and I hope that he continues to work on “complicating” principal-agent theorizing with questions of race and racism, of empire and imperialism, and of colonialism and coloniality. The way I see it, if it is true that principal-agent and master-slave narratives *both* draw on the same legacies in European thought (Davis 2015, 107-117), then it might make sense to re-read principal-agent theorizing from the perspective of Frantz Fanon and his joust with left-wing Hegelians in *Black Skin, White Masks* over the politics of (colonial) recognition (Gibson 2002, Kleinberg 2003). I think Rittinger alludes to this pathway in footnote 4, where he points to an alternative constructivist principal-agent theory—one that foregrounds the process of the agent’s identity formation, not the principal’s.

## NOTES

1. It was in 1993 that the journal, then co-edited by Richard K. Herrmann, Brian M. Pollins, and Goldie A. Shabad, published Roxanne Lynn Doty’s path-breaking “Foreign Policy as Social Construction: A Post-Positivist Analysis of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy in the Philippines.” Also, I am not saying that there was no critical work on the subject before the 1990s, only that this is not recognized in standard disciplinary histories.

2. On the remarkable stickiness of the Victorian-era “martial races” discourse, see Chisholm 2014 and Barkawi 2017.

# REMEMBERING AMBIGUITIES AND TENSIONS IN AMERICAN CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF THE OTHERNESS OF LOCAL PROXIES

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Alexandra Gheciu  
University of Ottawa

Rittinger deserves a round of applause for rethinking principal-agent theory through a constructivist lens. His argument is that variation in the American approach to enlisting foreign fighters reflects historical changes in how the U.S. has understood the reasons why proxies might prove unreliable. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Rittinger suggests, Americans saw proxies as biologically inferior, but in more recent times culture has replaced biology as “the source of unwanted behaviour” (396). These different understandings, the argument goes, have produced different strategies for managing local armed forces, “ranging from outright paternalism to less direct tutelage” (Ibid.).

“Arming the Other” makes a valuable contribution to knowledge by highlighting the limitations of rationalist treatments of the agency problem. Rittinger is correct to argue that, “By neglecting the social basis of the agency problem, rationalist agency theory finds itself wedded to a tautological, limiting conception of agent ‘type’” (398). He rightly points out that it is important to understand the ways in which the principal draws on particular bodies of social knowledge to identify/manage the problems that it believes its agents might pose.

However, I suggest that Rittinger’s constructivist argument— that how the U.S. makes sense of the *otherness* of local proxies shapes the strategies it puts in place— should have been further developed. In particular, Rittinger does not go far enough in examining the dynamics and implications of tensions and ambiguities involved in American conceptualizations—and treatments—of the *otherness* of proxies.

Consider, for instance, the argument that the agency problem frustrating U.S. efforts to enlist local fighters in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century can be seen as an expression of the “race problem” threatening white supremacy (397). This, Rittinger, rightly notes, is a potent reminder of the role historically played by race as a central, if often concealed, feature of international relations (Doty 1996; Vitalis 2015; Vucetic 2011). According to Rittinger, however, racism was displaced by culturalism after the Second World War—that is, in the U.S. characterizations of proxies, culture replaced biology as the main source of unwanted behavior (397). This, while maintaining Western-hierarchical thinking, led to a significant change in the strategy employed by Washington to manage proxy forces. In short, over time Washington shifted its approach from the direct command of proxies with its own officers to socializing them “so as to obviate the need for such close oversight” (396).

I fully agree with Rittinger that in recent decades a discourse stressing culture as a key source of unwanted behaviour has shaped in significant ways U.S. foreign policies and practices. In fact, in my own research I have shown that cultural assumptions about the sources of

problematic behaviour—largely associated with the Kantian-inspired democratic peace theory— informed a broad array of power-filled NATO socialization practices in post-Cold War Central/Eastern Europe (Gheciu 2005 a, b).

Nevertheless, I suggest that the argument about the “displacement of racism with culturalism after WW II” needs some qualification (397). It is not clear that there has been a complete “shift from biological to cultural understandings of alterity” (Ibid.), and that racial discourses no longer shape the ways in which the U.S. relates to local proxies—particularly in non-European countries. Sure, as a corollary to important normative changes that occurred not just in the U.S. but at the broader level of international society (e.g. those linked to decolonization), forms of outright paternalism characteristic of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century have been replaced by less direct tutelage. But there is significant evidence that racist assumptions have continued to shape U.S. policy-makers’ views and practices—albeit arguably in more subtle ways than they did a century ago. For instance, several studies show that racist assumptions about non-white local fighters and civilian populations have played important roles in shaping U.S. foreign policies and practices—including forms of American involvement in conflicts ranging from Vietnam to, more recently, Iraq and Afghanistan (Borstlemann 2001; Combs 2012; Khalid 2017; Singh 2017). Under these circumstances, the question is, how does the cultural discourse intersect, co-exist and arguably compete with persisting racist categories and assumptions? How does the co-existence of—and possibly competition between— such different understandings of alterity shape U.S. policies and practices vis-à-vis proxies in different countries? If “Arming the Other” had addressed some of these questions, Rittinger could have shed new and important light on the relationship between U.S. actors and local proxies.

Interestingly, Rittinger does pay some attention to the issue of coexistence and competition between different discourses—but his analysis does not go deep enough. In the final pages of the article, Rittinger correctly notes that in current U.S. efforts to train the Iraqi and Afghan militaries as well as Syrian rebels, the human rights discourse (dominant since 1976, according to this article) confronts an emerging discourse on failed states. Thus, “We see evidence of discursive disruption in the U.S.’ refusal to punish Afghan proxies for human rights violations” (406). This argument is important, but it could have been further developed and nuanced. In a historical perspective, it is important to note that even in the pre-9/11 period, there was competition in Washington between different conceptualizations of local proxies in various countries. Consequently, the American commitment to the human rights discourse has long been complicated and diluted by tensions and ambiguities. There is evidence that powerful disruptions of the human rights discourse occurred in several instances, both during and after the Cold War, as different kinds of arguments—often rooted in understandings of the geo-strategic importance of various *others*—competed with human rights considerations. Long before the U.S. refused to punish Afghan proxies for human rights violations, American officials tolerated human rights abuses in countries seen as strategically important—e.g. Turkey and Pakistan, to name but a couple (Cohn 2011, Gabelnick et al. 1999; Lagon 2011). Under these circumstances, the analysis of the ways in which the U.S. has “armed the other” since the presumed triumph of the human rights discourse would have been stronger if it had focused more on the power-filled dynamics and implications of the competition between that discourse and alternative arguments.

More recently, as Rittinger notes, the state failure discourse has played a powerful role in Washington. This raises important questions about the U.S. commitment to the human rights discourse and practices in the post-9/11 world. It should also be noted that the relationship between the U.S. and local proxies in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan has

been further complicated by a dynamic that is not examined in this article: the growing American reliance on private military and security companies (PMSCs) (Avant and Sigelman 2010; Avant and De Nevers 2011). PMSCs do not always support the agendas of American or local actors, and some of them have been accused of racist behaviour and serious human rights violations, particularly in Iraq. To further muddy the waters, the status of the American human rights discourse has become even more uncertain in the past couple of years. To a large extent, this is due to President Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy and explicit support for a series of authoritarian leaders and anti-democratic policies. In short, it is not clear that one can still regard the human rights discourse as dominant in contemporary America, as this article suggests (Table 1, 401).

In the final analysis, however, Rittinger's constructivist reworking of agency theory remains a valuable contribution to knowledge. While I think that an analysis of the issues mentioned above would have strengthened his argument, I do believe that he deserves a lot of credit for explaining the limitations of rationalist accounts of the principal-agent theory, and for showing that, over the years, different characterizations of local proxies led American officials to different interpretations of the agency problem and translated into different approaches to mitigating that problem.

# A RESPONSE TO RESPONSES

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Eric Rittinger  
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I want to thank Tarak Barkawi, Srdjan Vucetic, and Alexandra Gheciu for their commentaries and critiques. And I thank the editors of *ISQ* for providing this forum. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to discuss my article with these scholars, whose work I am indebted to.

Their replies raise several overlapping points, which I address below.

I had two aims in my article. First, I sought to subvert the economism of rationalist principal-agent theory, unearthing the social process by which the agent becomes a “problem” in the first place. Second, I wanted to highlight an understudied aspect of American empire, chronicling U.S. efforts to enlist local forces in its small wars.

To pursue these aims, I traced the speeches, articles, and reports deployed by American policymakers when, at different historical moments, they grappled with the question that Vucetic begins his reply with. This approach kept me within a fairly limited ambit.

As Vucetic and Barkawi recognize, I bracketed off the agent’s role in socially constructing the principal-agent problem. Certainly, focusing on that role could advance the aims listed above. We could learn much about the agency problem, for example, by following the rise of Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua and Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. They leveraged their positions in American-created national guards to secure political power for themselves, which proved an asset and, at times, a liability, for the U.S. (Goldwert 1962; Rabe 1988; Rittinger 2015). Or consider the more recent example of Colombian soldiers who teach at the U.S. Army’s Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (formerly the School of the Americas). Their role as instructors confirms Lesley Gill’s account (2004) of how American military tutelage opens pathways for career advancement and status-seeking—both at home and within the metropole. Agents clearly exercise agency vis-à-vis their principal. Focusing on a principal’s representative voices, as I do in my article, in no way denies that the agent’s story also deserves to be told.

I see my article as a necessary first step, however, in challenging ahistorical, rationalist treatments of American “security force assistance” (Biddle et al. 2017; see also Byman 2006 and Ladwig 2017). This growing literature explains the challenges of delegating warfighting to locals and recommends policies for influencing them, such as “conditionality” rather than “inducement” (Ladwig 2017). In effect, this literature wants to help the principal recognize and manage the agency problem. My article intervenes here to historicize that kind of policy advice. The genealogy I present belies the premise, for example, that the principal always treated its agents as rational actors who could be disciplined through material incentives and cost-benefit calculations.

What was most relevant for my purposes, therefore, was the process of social construction that occurs among those who speak on behalf of the principal and formulate its agency slack countermeasures. For U.S. policymakers, armed proxies presented different threats and

opportunities at different historical moments. This variation had little to do with these agents' objective qualities. Rather, it stemmed from changes in the discourses—systems of authoritative meaning—that policymakers brought to bear on prosecuting small wars via local fighters. Each discourse substantiated the agency problem by defining its source (nature or culture) and its remedy (paternalism or tutelage). Hence, these discourses did prove “socially efficacious”—as Barkawi puts it—by providing a basis from which to enact policy.

In my account, discourse comes first, rather than discreet, preexisting actors, as Barkawi argues. For instance, the U.S. did not confront its Filipino proxies in 1898 with an identity of “racial superior” already fully formed. That identity materialized, in part, through “imperial encounters” (Doty 1996, 1-4) with those proxies, filtered through the pseudo-science of scientific racism, which contrasted the U.S., the principal, against the subordinated, racialized agent. In other words, realizing American identity required alterity. This points to a *discursive* process of “co-constitution,” whereby one side only comes into existence through its relation to another. Whether in scientific racism, progressivism, modernization/ decolonization, or the human rights regime, the Other was always already implicated in the Self. Both sides were “intertwined,” to use Barkawi’s term. Here we see the interplay of “productive” and “structural” power (Barnett and Duvall 2005). The rhetorical resources made available by these discourses represented co-constituted, asymmetrical principal-agent relationships.

In addition, Vucetic and Gheciu question my dichotomization of race and culture. First, am I right to divide them in this way, since, as Vucetic notes, they may only differ by “degree, not kind”? I agree that we should avoid overstating their differences. In my article, in fact, they serve a similar rhetorical function. Both push the agent away from the principal’s desires and hence present obstacles to overcome. The main difference centers on the question of mutability—whether the source of agency slack is hardwired into the agent or the result of socialization. As I argue, this variation feeds into justifications for different agency slack countermeasures. An agent treated as intrinsically prone to misbehavior requires paternalistic oversight. An agent driven to misbehavior by socialization can, at least in principle, be socialized into doing what the principal prefers. In this way, culturalism, like racism, subordinates the Other, but leads to different implications. For instance, if those with the “wrong” cultural values fail to change, despite American tutelage, then not only are they deficient; they are willfully so. They could have changed, but they *chose* not to. The presumption here—that assimilation is even possible—seems inconsistent with a system of human classification built on immutable biological hierarchy.

Second, Vucetic and Gheciu suggest that culturalism did not fully displace racism after WWII. It endures, Gheciu explains, “albeit arguably in more subtle ways.” I agree, but to capture the process of policy legitimization that played out among the principal’s representatives, I focused on *dominant* themes, tropes, and characterizations. These “rhetorical commonplaces” (Jackson 2006, 28) were key, because, in an explicit way, they linked particular understandings of agents to the “best” means of disciplining them. When examining texts from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, racism and fears of ingrained partisanship operated at the surface, reflecting broad intersubjective understandings of the Other within the U.S.’s growing imperial orbit. In the texts I analyzed from the post-WWII period, I again looked for what was in plain view. And I found a dramatic shift away from that overt racism. This is not to deny that traces of it persist. But very different rhetorical resources came to dominate these policy discussions during the Cold War and after.

This brings me to Vucetic's questions on methodology. The kind of discourse analysis I find useful in addressing those questions foregrounds contestation and the limits of socially sustainable rhetoric. For example, controversy over "native" officers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century ended up reasserting the assumptions of scientific racism; even proponents of granting more authority to local fighters conceded the "natural" superiority of white overseers. More recently, controversy over associating with illiberal proxies (which Gheciu highlights) sustains the human rights regime; those who advocate associating with them still try to shroud their abuses or promote the civilizing effects of American tutelage, which effectively concedes the political costs that these associations incur. In this analysis, dominant discourses are those that set the terms of policy debate.

Of course, as I show in my article, dominant discourses do not stay dominant. Here I would second Gheciu's remark about the recent weakening of the human rights regime amid greater sensitivity to the "failed states" problem. And to take this even further, I would point to President Trump's characterizations of some foreigners as "animals," which signal a return to intrinsic, rather than cultural, understandings of alterity.

The replies illuminate an agenda for future research and the continued development of constructivist principal-agent theory. What role has the agent played in the social construction of the agency problem? What does the tension between human rights and "failed states" portend for the future of America's small wars? And finally, as Gheciu discusses, how does the relationship between the U.S. and private security companies incarnate novel versions of the principal-agent problem?

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