

COMMENTARY OPEN ACCESS

A Response to Hekki Patomäki': On Social Mechanisms

Gabriel A. Pierzynski¹  | Jonathan Joseph² ¹London School of Economics, London, UK | ²University of Bristol, Bristol, UKCorrespondence: Jonathan Joseph (Jonathan.joseph@bristol.ac.uk)

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1 | Introduction

Heikki Patomäki (2025) sets out three aims in his critique of the patrimonial imperialism piece by Pierzynski and Joseph (2025), published in this journal. The first is that the patrimonial imperialism argument assumes a traditional International Relations (IR) framework of 'levels of analysis' which is subsequently critiqued. The second criticism relates to the manner in which critical realism is deployed, specifically its use of the notions of the 'real' and 'actual'. Third, Patomäki presents an alternative explanation of the causes of the Russo-Ukrainian war, utilising a process-ontological and holistic lens. The following reply will counter these criticisms through a focus on the primacy of social mechanisms as explanatory vehicles. The reply will assert that Patomäki's (2025) multi-causal method for deducing the causes of the Russo-Ukrainian war shifts focus away from the identification of dominant causal mechanisms such as that we identify as patrimonial imperialism than on dominant causal mechanisms. The reply will be structured as a series of quotes from the critique and replies.

2 | On the Sedimented State

In this explanation, patrimonial imperialism is understood as a historically sedimented state form. The argument assumes that the Russian state is inherently constructed in imperialist terms: its internal structures, modes of authority, and collective self-understanding have long been embedded within patterns of imperial domination' (1).

The main focus of explanation must therefore be on the concept of imperialism, and it is precisely here where the risk of metaphysical abstraction and ethically-politically problematic essentialism lies' (8).

We do not assume that Russia must be understood as inherently imperialist. We provide a diagnosis of a set of underlying mechanisms based on our understanding of state-society relations and how this has coalesced around the reproduction of patrimonial imperialism and perpetuated through each iteration of the Russian state. Although critical realism points to the multiplicity of structures and generative mechanisms, it is essential for a political scientist to be able to identify those that are more dominant and relatively enduring, something that is done through focussing on the causal mechanism that can best explain which structures arise and how they come to be ingrained and perpetuated. The causal approach focused on the identification of dominant mechanisms can be subject to examination through such things as historical and process-tracing analyses. That is not to say that patrimonial imperialism is an iron law of reality, or something more 'real' than all other explanations. It is best understood though asking about the dominant causal mechanism arising out of state-society relations, noting that this does by necessity influence all analyses of Russian decisions or outcomes. It is considered one of the primary factors for the initiation of the Russo-Ukrainian war, but the critical realist model of stratified reality does not assert that it is the only reason or cause. It is a diagnosis of a dominant mechanism or set of mechanisms, a social structure that perpetuates itself through regime changes, and influences state decisions over a long duration. Therefore, asserting that the patrimonial imperialism framework is a totalising one is mistaken, it is about locating dominant mechanisms in a wider framework of a multi-causal reality.

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3 | On the IR 'Levels-of-Analysis'

What is more, it appears that the resulting taxonomy of causes aligns with the standard International Relations (IR) three 'levels of analysis' scheme (2).

Rather than seeing this in terms of IR's levels of analysis, the basis of the approach lies in the critical realist argument concerning the stratification of reality, where differences in forms of knowledge presuppose some real differences 'out there' as suggested by differentiation of the sciences—chemistry, physics, biology etc. To draw an analogy with Bhaskar's conception of natural science, the stratification of forms of explanation reflects a real stratification in the world and that without this real differentiation, 'the stratification of science must appear as a kind of historical accident, lacking any internal rationale' (Bhaskar 2008, 161). Bhaskar's work is concerned with this very issue of identifying layers of reality, likewise the article looks for underlying layers of the social and the dominant causal mechanisms and causal complexes that brought about and were manifested in the Russo-Ukrainian war. The approach employed investigates a social mechanism occurring through what we have termed patrimonial imperialism which arises out of state–society relations and perpetuates itself over time and across regime changes (Pierzynski and Joseph 2025). The approach is not therefore strictly aligned with IR 'levels-of-analysis', we employ a more fluid approach aligned with debates about emergent social features, structure–agency and occurrent mechanisms. This approach can better accommodate the analysis of relational causal complexes through the possibility of identifying the fundamental driving factors of events, and by extension enables the development of the patrimonial imperialism framework. We therefore assert the primacy of (dominant) mechanisms, not of process in scientific inquiry.

4 | On Mechanisms

Thus, it is misleading to think that the Russian state has maintained the same structure for hundreds of years (Omore on this soon); rather, the rise of conservative ideas and the retrogression of practices becomes understandable and explainable in terms of relatively recent processes and historical turns (6).

Causal processes always involve many components that together produce effects. Sometimes these factors and forces may conflict with each other; often they dampen or reinforce each other's effects (6).

We do not assert that the Russian state has maintained the same structure for hundreds of years. We identify a dominant causal mechanism, grounded in state–society relations that gives the state an imperialist character and drives its actions through different regime structures. There are mechanisms that supersede conventional state-structural approaches, ones that are deeper-rooted than others and have a longer duration.

Patrimonial imperialism illustrates that occurrence and pays heed to what role state structure can play in ingraining a social mechanism through the life of a state and society. We therefore present a multi-component causal framework with a central mechanism in the form of patrimonial imperialism. While Patomäki' argues that: '*There is no ontological or other reason to prefer a priori state-level structural explanations*' (7). We argue that we have a good ontological reason to prefer a causal framework with a dominant social mechanism, rather than one that does not. In the philosophy of science, a causal illustration requires not only the presentation of a set of corollaries but an identification of how a specific process unfolds (Machamer et al. 2000). Patomäki' further states:

However, this conflict has a multi-layered historical context, including, for example, local struggles and security dilemmas, transformations of the Ukrainian and Russian states, the operations and expansion of the EU, Russia's positioning in the world economy, and various developments and crises in the global political economy' (6).

We do not disagree with any of these, but seek to identify a dominant cause among many and illustrate how this mechanism might be manifested in the context of the causes of the Russo-Ukrainian war. There will be congruent and counter mechanisms in this process, but these do not all have equal standing, and we reject any drift towards a more relational approach. Hence, we distinguish the argument from Patomäki's focus on process. An identification of multiple causes and processes makes it near impossible to put forward reasoned causal inferences about reality. This we believe is the mistaken trajectory of Bhaskar's own work as his philosophy of science gives way to what Patomäki' identifies as a more 'dialectical' approach in his subsequent work. If we are to argue over what is the best 'version' of critical realism, then our point would be that to fail to give primacy to one or other guiding mechanism is more akin to employing a post-structuralist relational ontology rather than a critical realist one (Ashley 1988).

5 | Tertiary Critiques

Ironically, when I look at the metaphysically abstract characterisations of the patrimonial-imperialist state in Pierzynski and Joseph's paper, I cannot help but think of Britain as a possible example' (8).

We agree that the UK may have patrimonial imperialist elements. We encourage further work on this, keeping in mind that sub-structure imperial practices in the case of the UK will likely not be the dominant explanatory mechanism, as is the case with Russia.

A patrimonial state is a subtype of traditional authority, where the authority of the ruler is hereditary, alienable, and capable of division by inheritance' (8).

The dictionary definition of patrimony was used on its own terms. The concept of patrimonial imperialism is disconnected from Weberian patrimony (1978) and Eisenstadt's personalism (1973). It bears closer resemblance to nationalism theories but is in fact it is a sub-state theory that draws on sociological and historical studies.

Consider the development of post-USSR Russia. As I have argued elsewhere (Author), it was the neoliberal 'shock therapy' and its consequences that contributed significantly to Russia's gradual distancing from Western liberalism, the securitisation of episodes such as the Ukrainian orange revolution (occurring in the context of ongoing security dilemmas and nuclear deterrence), and a gradual shift towards a more authoritarian system (6).

Neoliberal 'shock therapy' did not have the same results in countries such as Poland, which bore legacies of imperialism and highly unequal authoritarian states before the Second World War. In its case the 'shock therapy' was not a force that dismantled the potential for democratisation, but rather brought it closer to the then prevalent ideas of the West and the West itself (Easter 2012; Schneider 2013). This we argue does not arise out of a 'retrogression of practices (...) in terms of relatively recent processes and historical turns' (6) but out of deep-seated imperial schematics which can take on different forms with each iteration of state but conform to the same substructure. As such the argument seen through the lens of patrimonial imperialism can be stated to have been a proof of it, through different practices the core mechanism and structure remained the same.

6 | Conclusion

Patomäki's rejoinder sought to assert the primacy of process through the lens of causal complexes in relation to the causes of the Russo-Ukrainian war. We in turn assert the primacy of mechanisms for scientific explanations. The patrimonial imperialism framework, grounded in the critical realist understanding of stratified reality and emergent outcomes is able to accommodate the many possible events while maintaining the need to identify the dominant cause (without making it an essentialist framework). In doing so it goes beyond correlations between events presented by Patomäki', and opts for the identification of a dominant mechanism as the basis for causal explanations, that is in line with Bhaskar's earlier philosophy of science. The patrimonial imperialism framework and related model of stratified reality aim to act as a programmatic basis for the investigation of prevalent sub-structure imperial influences. We assert that patrimonial imperialism provides a causal mechanism and diagnosis that can be used for modelling imperial behaviour through regime changes, and gives a firmer basis for investigation, political rationale, and reform than Patomäki's multi-process framework.

Ethics Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

Consent

The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

Jonathan Joseph is on the editorial board of JTSB.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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