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Foucault and International Relations

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PHILIPPE FOURNIER, MAY 12 2014

Michel Foucault's name will be familiar to most IR scholars and his influence on the discipline appears to be beyond doubt. The work that Foucault inspired in International Relations is invariably associated with the post-structuralist approach and includes theoretical interventions as much as detailed genealogies. This is not to say that tracing Foucault's influence on IR is an easy task. Indeed, the fact that he had very little to say about international politics in his own work, that many IR scholars refer to him only parsimoniously, and that his thought is ever-dynamic, elusive, and occasionally frustrating presents some challenges. Nonetheless, it can be traced in the different phases of poststructuralist inquiry in International Relations. First, Foucault's influence can be found in the early critiques of reigning paradigms in IR theory; second, in discourse analysis; and third, in global governmentality studies. In this short piece, I revisit some of Foucault's philosophical inclinations, methods, and concepts, and relate them to a series of significant currents and authors in the discipline. Needless to say, the scholars mentioned here do not constitute an exhaustive selection.

The first 'wave' of poststructuralist work in International Relations, which emerged in the mid to late 1980s, was mainly concerned with revealing and destabilizing the central assumptions of (neo)realism. Apart from questioning the positivist starting point that immutable laws can explain all social phenomena and that language stands apart from the object it designates, poststructuralists like Richard K. Ashley[1] cast doubt on the idea that sovereignty, anarchy, and the modern rational subject constitute seamless and self-evident foundations for the study of world politics. Ashley regards neorealism's inbuilt inclination to discipline meaning and to exclude ambiguity as a characteristically modern tendency. Modernity is here understood as a broad philosophical viewpoint or attitude characterised, among other things, by a belief in progress and rationality. Several distinct social-theoretical approaches, ranging from critical theory to neorealism, exhibit modern propensities, either in their willingness to preserve the idea of an unscathed version of truth and emancipation, or in their willingness to use instrumental rationality to predict and control social developments. Poststructuralist scholars like Ashley, but also Der Derian and Shapiro[2], Walker[3], Campbell, and Dillon[4], all share in a suspicion of modern 'metanarratives' and indict prevailing theories of International Relations (realism, liberalism, and Marxism) for displaying some degree of ahistoricity, closure, and essentialism. They reject transcendental constructs such as reason and consciousness, and argue that their content is historically and culturally contingent. This is where Foucault comes in. His idea of 'truth', which he defines as

a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements... [and] is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it[5],

and the connexions he identifies between power and knowledge, have been particularly useful to expose and critique the assumptions and political effects of mainstream IR theories.

For Foucault, the function of knowledge is not to identify correlations or causal chains between pre-existing entities, but to classify, regulate, and normalize in view of making things and people manageable. In this sense, knowledge produces specific effects, problems, and identities. Through his investigation of psychiatric, medical, and carceral discourses, Foucault is trying to show that 'sickness' and 'deviance' are not objective conditions, but constructed through a series of arbitrary truth claims, purposive exclusions, and segmented routines in specified institutional

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spaces. As applied to the international, this means that 'state sovereignty' and 'anarchy' are constructs that delimitate and validate particular visions of world politics at the expense of others. However, as Jan Selby[6] correctly points out, first generation poststructuralists in IR are influenced by a wide range of thinkers, Derrida being another important source, and Foucault is but one of their inspirations.

Related to Foucault's conception of truth, power, and knowledge is discourse. In the *Archaeology of Knowledge*[7], discourse designates the linguistic conventions, modes of representation, and rules that produce particular domains of knowledge, which Foucault calls 'discursive formations'. Contrarily to a widely held view in the social sciences and in the history of ideas, discursive formations are more characterized by discontinuity, contingency, and cultural and historical specificity than by an underlying coherence or unity. Whilst the *Archaeology* is a complex methodological and philosophical exercise, intent on revealing the conditions of possibility for 'knowledge' and meaning, namely of what can be thought and said at any particular time, Foucault's later work makes use of a slightly different kind of discourse analysis: genealogy. Largely inspired by Nietzsche, genealogy is a means to investigate the constitution of a given discourse through the rehabilitation of the counter-discourses that have been actively discarded. It aims to show that the seemingly smooth and linear aspect of a specific knowledge domain is arrived at through the violent exclusion or silencing of alternative interpretations. More than archaeology, genealogy emphasizes the ongoing play of dominations and recognizes that power may be better channelled, although not necessarily 'possessed', by particular social actors.

Many scholars of international relations have drawn upon Foucault's conception of discourse, either directly or indirectly. Whilst some like Neal[8], Larsen[9], and Milliken[10] have leaned towards an archaeological approach, others like Campbell[11] and Bartelson[12] have favoured genealogy. Generally speaking, Foucault has had considerable influence on the study of discourse in International Relations. This is particularly the case in post-structuralist studies of identity-formation, whereby sanctioned representations of national identity emerge through their differentiation from a dangerous 'Other', both within and without national boundaries. IR works that examine policy papers, official speeches, and other mediums in view of revealing the discursive production of enmity, insecurity, and existential threat often rely heavily on Foucault's method and critical outlook.

One of the more recent strands of Foucault-inspired work in International Relations is global governmentality. In a series of lectures in the late 1970s, Foucault defines governmentality as

the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security[13].

He argues that the population, 'a collective body with "probabilities of life" and "forces that [can] be modified" in "a space in which it [can] be distributed in an optimal manner"[14], emerges as a distinct preoccupation towards the end of the 18th century. The multifaceted and de-centred perpetuation of collective management is facilitated by 'biopower'. The latter refers to the ways in which life is progressively inscribed and codified in order to be made calculable and manageable. This entails a vision of power as a creative and productive force that "traverses and produces things, induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse"[15], and not as a prohibitive force that imposes or represses. Since governmentality is primarily associated with 'liberal' political regimes, rationalities of rule seek to produce political and economic freedoms[16].

The apparatuses of security that Foucault talks about in his definition of governmentality amount to the means and strategies that are used to manage the lacks and excesses of freedom. The study of 'risk' from a broadly foucaultian perspective[17] (Aradau and Van Munster 2007) is concerned precisely with how contingency is managed at the global level and with how future developments can be predicted and controlled. Within a (neo)liberal rationality of government, risk-management is consistent with the dual objective of maintaining circulation and keeping the population 'happy' and productive. Compared to Foucault's earlier work on the intricacies of discursive formations, governmentality points to a more general design relating the ideational and material structures to the regulation of individual behaviour.

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Several International Relations scholars have started to use governmentality in order to reconstitute the “practices, programmes, techniques and strategies” that take the international and, incidentally, global population as terrains of intervention[18]. Others like Dillon and Read[19] have extended the notion of biopolitics to global liberal rule in view of revealing its propensity to pacify and homogenize ill-adapted forms of life. However, the application or ‘scaling-up’ of governmentality to international relations has been criticized by a number of commentators. Selby and Joseph[20] have suggested that the fact the international sphere is unevenly governmentalized can only be explained by referring to the structural features of the global political economy. In any case, governmentality is an increasingly popular perspective in international politics and elsewhere.

Although Foucault is the single most cited scholar in the social sciences and has a strong foothold in International Relations, the work he has inspired remains somewhat marginalized within the discipline. Foucault’s deep suspicion of modern constructs, such as the ‘subject’, ‘reason’, or ‘freedom’, and of the idea that reality and its components have fixed essences, has not endeared him to the majority of IR scholars. In the same way, the fact that he wanted his work to be like a toolkit and thus did not see it as any kind of system, and that he did not believe that there was a readily-constituted alternative to the sway of power, has attracted criticism from several quarters. Nonetheless, the critical ethos he left behind has greatly inspired IR scholars who have questioned the permanence, coherence, and unity of signifiers like the state, identity, security, and sovereignty. This questioning and de-familiarization has endured and has taken a multiplicity of forms. In the end, Foucault’s critical ethos has certainly played a significant part in the irresistible rise of post-positivist approaches.

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