How Important are Practices of Representation in Security Discourses?
Written by Liam A Simmonds

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Practices of representation, regardless of one's own ontological and epistemological beliefs or methodological preferences, are incredibly important. It is through these constructions and repetitions that "we organise our understanding of reality" (Bleiker, 2001, p. 512). Regardless of what one considers a legitimate source of knowledge or understands as possible to know concerning the 'real world', representation and the practices that are attached to it are not only deeply significant regarding security discourses but also in every facet of our socio-political lives. Building upon this platform of proclaiming the importance of representation within security discourses, I shall explore its political significance using a primarily poststructuralist (PS) framework of understanding, then later combining it with the aesthetic approach to capture another important dimension into the practices of representation.

The structure of this essay is to be as follows: Prior to the first section, I shall provide a briefly clarification on key terms before moving on to the main section where I shall analyse the PS approach to the importance of representation, including the employment of concepts such as productive power. Following on, I shall apply this PS understanding of representation to a number of examples in world politics. The third section of this essay shall focus on an adjacent theoretical branch of PS; the aesthetic turn of International Relations (IR). I shall elucidate the theory behind this PS-informed approach before briefly applying it to an example to expose its utility in understanding practices of representation. Finally, I will conclude by summarising and reiterating key positions taken throughout this essay while additionally offering avenues for further research on the topics of representation.

Before this, I will firstly elucidate the terms 'security' and 'discourse'. For discourse I use Foucault's notion that they are bundles of semiotic signs made communicable through relations between objects and subjects (Foucault, 1972). Importantly, discourse is constitutive of both the representation and the representative; the meaning and the subject. Discourse, like power, is creative (Bialasiewicz, et al., 2007, pp. 406-407). A fluid usage of what security is will be employed. Informed by David Campbell's writing where he emphasises the construction of danger (Campbell, 1998), the exact contents of what the term 'security' contains ranges from the militaristic to the social (Alvarez, 2006, p. 62).

Poststructuralist Theory and Representation

Through the usage of a PS understanding to IR, one obtains a solid critical grounding from which the implicit and explicit assumptions that root mainstream, positivist theorising can be tackled from (Smith, 1996, p. 11). Ashley and Walker assert that PS has brought uncertainty to previously evident notions of "subjectivity, objectivity and conduct" (1990, p. 375), this is also true regarding PS's influence on the study of representation. The importance of representation, for PS, lies in the fact that there is no single 'truth' when it comes to knowledge of politics, nor is it possible to separate ourselves from such knowledge (Bleiker, 2009, p. 31). There is only a series of competing subjective perspectives (Devetak, 2005, p. 164). It is from this starting point that the importance of representation becomes clear; given that there is no objective perspective on which to view events with, it becomes possible that "the same events can be represented in markedly different ways with significantly different effects" (Campbell, 1998, p. 33). Foucault's work on productive power can be applied to the illuminate the political consequences of representation, indeed, the political potential of representation is of upmost importance for any 'reality' of politics (Devetak, 2005, p. 168), be it within the discourses of security, or political-economy, or social. In the context of this

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essay, power is productive in the sense that it can shape the institutions and actors near it, much in the same way a river can erode the banks that enclose it to form new geographical features. Productive power can be seen in the development of behaviours and identities, both of which are deeply linked to the question of representation which this essay addresses. Representations, like knowledge, are not neutral, but instead follow conventions that have been neutralised and legitimised through constant productive discourse (van der Ree, 2013, p. 24). Through the understanding of above, representation must be seen, in the PS sense, as a complex bundle of specific performative discourses tied upon in Foucauldian power relations.

Van der Ree importantly reminds us of three things regarding discussions of representation; its distortive nature, its social nature, and its power (2013, p. 26). The latter two points combine potently to create the third. Taking what we know about representation as a distortive process, it is important to remember that while always present, this distortion is not an autonomous procedure but requires input to fully formulate a specific representation (Scheufele, 1999). That is, all forms of representation that attempt to be realistic nonetheless depend on a selective likeness, a process by which certain aspects are emphasised while others are ignored (van Fraassen, 2008, p. 7). It is through this selection that representation takes on an aspect of political instrumentality: "the perspective we choose has to be the perspective that offers the highest utility for our purposes" (van der Ree, 2013, p. 27). Compounding on this, is the social aspect of representation. The process of formulation takes place within a complex nexus of intersubjective and performative meanings, power relations and other distortive representations (van der Ree, 2013, p. 27). As such, the process of representation has a refractive yet constitutive influence any social interaction, becoming a small element in how human relations 'naturally' function. It is because of the last point, representation as power, that it becomes of greater significance to the study of security discourses, which act as the very containers of legitimacy and possibility for some of the most powerful human emotions and actions; war, exclusion and violence.

The power of representation lies in its ability to construct what is constituted as 'truth' or 'commonsensical' which can act as a template for the formation of subjects (Digeser, 1992, p. 987). This power of 'objectification' can lead to repressive forms of representation that are perceived as natural, further constricting those who it marginalises (van der Ree, 2013, p. 27). Highlighting the performative power of representational discourses, Bleiker argues that this has happened within the field of IR itself, with Realist theorising being successfully in transforming politically-motivated thinking into universal explanations of human and state behaviour in world politics, citing Kenneth Waltz's interpretation of the logic of structural anarchy as one such example (Bleiker, 2001, p. 515). As a result of such reiterative discourses, the common sense of the mainstream have suppressed the aesthetic approach to politics within IR, much to the detriment of the entire discipline (Bleiker, 2001, pp. 515-516), by placing cultural artefacts outside the boundaries of legitimate academic study.

Poststructuralism and Representation Applied to World Politics

In this section I shall look at a number of examples at how a PS-informed theory of representation plays a significant role within security discourses. Behnke notes the discourse of war has been represented, since the famous proclamation from Clausewitz that "War Is Merely the Continuation of Policy by Other Means", as a legitimised instrument of management in a world politics, rather than being portrayed as a radical, extreme expression of humanity's flaws (2006). This is perhaps a generalisation, however, a more nuanced view would notice that within security discourses within the West there is a discrepancy in the representation of violence, aggression and war depending on who the perpetrator is and who the victim is. Through the discursive power of 'the war on terror', through which shapes the values and behaviour of some and completely redefines the identity of others (Karampampas, 2009, p. 36), terrorist actors are not considered legitimate participants of war and are criminalised and their concerns and actions are automatically delegitimised as a consequence (Van Munster, 2004, p. 148). This specific representation simultaneously denies groups such as Hamas and Hizbollah legitimacy as a socially positive political party and positions them as an enemy of the West and the values it upholds (Jackson, 2007, p. 401). The productive power of representation is the driving force by which lives are to be included or excluded from the "realm of the political" (Masters, 2009, p. 40) and it is this denial of the political that breeds resentment and hatred. The other side of this duality is the Western self and represents itself, Žižek claims, as assuming the role of the Red Cross, an actor that only uses war as a tool for "peace and global order" (Žižek, 2002, pp. 93-94). These powerful discourses produce extremely rigid representations of states, groups and events that construct the basis upon which

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future security discourses will be based upon.

In extremis, the productive potential of representation within security discourses culminate in the concept of *homo sacer*, 'bare life'. Extreme separation from the political leads to lives being cast outside politics, law, society and morality (Masters, 2009, p. 34). Bare life is a state of continuous performance it is one that is reduced to a damaged form of life, one of political insignificance, made possible through the political realm itself (Ziarek, 2012, p. 194). Through discursive and visual modes of representation, productive enclosures of space and sovereign creations of states of exception that fuel the production of bare life, those who become bare life tread the thin line between life and death, inclusion and exclusion (Sowah. 2014, 1-2). Representational discourses of course impact on security discourses, but the reverse is also true. It is important to realise that 'the matrix of war' imbues war with the notion of discursive and institutional constitutive elements (Jabri, 2006, p. 50). Deleuze notes that such discourse that materialise bare life are permitted and legitimised to run through 'liberal' society during times of war (Deleuze, 1986). Through the introduction of 'the war on terror' a permanence to this "state of exception" has been constructed, formed with it are a set of disciplinary and controlling practices, creating a representation of a constant other who is typified in cultural and racial terms (Jabri, 2006, p. 52). A greater issue compounding on this is that within this enduring state of 'war' against terror is that the groups, ideas and events that the label of terrorism seeks to define is highly unstable. The 'elasticity of the concept of enemy' Jabri that puts forward an argument that claims as the subject representations within the matrix of war shift the possibility that "today's friends may indeed be tomorrow's enemies" (Jabri, 2006, p. 61). The term 'terrorist', for instance, has come to represent such a wide range of actors, from Osama bin Laden to Nelson Mandela. The true insidious nature of such power, however, does not come from such large transformations in representation of the enemy, although representation is fundamental in the creation of any sort of enemy at all. Rather, it is the smaller, less obvious shifts that occur within society that the discourses of *homo sacer* run through. Frequently, as the discourses of bare life are culturally and racially-bound they struggle to acknowledge anything else. In times of war, racism and cultural prejudice becomes a functional state practice (Jabri, 2006, p. 61), witnessed in the interment of a large number of Japanese and Japanese-Americans by the USA during World War II, and, through the paradigmatic 'war on terror', the UK's Terrorism Act 2000 which was dyed with implicit Islamaphobic colourings.

Foucault identifies the dynamics of power/knowledge as forming "a grid of intelligibility of the social order" (1978, p. 93). Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero understand this grid to function as an evaluating mechanism of subjects, a means by which meanings and social objects are "weighed, distributed, valued" (2008, p. 272). Combined with the productive discourses of 'the war on terror', these evaluating mechanisms can be witnessed in one example in the US were the 'Computer Assisted Passenger Pre-Screening' (CAPPS) system which constructs different levels of (in)security determined by statistical risk evaluation by assigning all passengers one of three identities: red, yellow and green. The yellow identity is automatically assigned to Muslim individuals travelling from the Middle East (Ramonet, 2003, p. 1). What is demonstrated here is the politico-legal power of representation. These arbitrary definitions that depicted an entire region of people as potential dangerous is highly significant.. Firstly, such state-enforced representations of particular groups of people will vertebrate strongly into other areas of society, acting as a normalising force for the implementation of exclusionary practices of these groups elsewhere.

Moving away slightly from representation of the terrorist other and focusing slightly on the Western, threatened self. Jabri notes a change in the meanings and representation attached to specific actions, objects and groups when security discourses of a state shift (2006, p. 51). The balance of liberty and security after the Charlie Hebdo Paris attacks is a highly relevant example. The changing representation of certain aspects of liberty has been embedded through a combination of discourses of securitisation and discourses of war, specifically, the war on terror (Jabri, 2006, p. 51). Prime Minister Cameron recently stated the need to ban encryption and other technologies that prevent the government from having access to its content (Cameron in Watt, et al., 2015). As Masnick notes, this rebalancing can be witnessed through a small, yet significant update to the FBI's website: Following the introduction of strong levels of system encryption by Apple and Google on their most recent mobile operating systems, encryption is no longer a government-backed recommended safety tip (Masnick, 2015). It is significant that because encryption is *no longer* a recommended practice demonstrates how representation in contemporary security discourses is liable to change. The rhetoric used by both the FBI and Prime Minister Cameron is that encryption is no longer a tool of liberty, of the West, of the model citizen, but, paradoxically, has become a tool of insecurity, of the Other, of terrorists

and kidnappers. Through the productive power of representation, encryption has been completely altered, acting as a small fragment of the larger collection of norm and value shaping discourses constantly produced and reproduced which work to formulate "social process and systems of knowledge through which meaning is produced, fixed, lived, experienced and transformed." (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 55)

The Aesthetic Turn of Representation and World Politics

While a 'conventional' PS take on representation within world politics is certainly useful, combing it with an aesthetic approach can offer a fresh insight into questions of representation. Bleiker has advanced a continuation of PS thinking and formulated it into another means through which we can study the importance of representations in politics; the aesthetics approach (2001). It is through an aesthetic approach to representation can we draw attention to a wider range of potentially valuable insights into all areas of the political, including security discourses (Bleiker, 2001, p. 514). Bleiker contrasts his aesthetic approach with the mimetic form of representation used by the dominant mainstream theories of IR, particularly, he notes, the school of realism (2001, pp. 510, 515-516). While the mimetic approach seeks "to represent politics as realistically and authentically as possible", the aesthetic approach acknowledges what Bleiker calls a "gap" between the representation and what is being represented (2001, p. 510). This acknowledgment of this gap is important, for it is the gap of difference between the representation and the represented is exactly where the location of the politics of representation lies (Bleiker, 2001, p. 512). Since power is entwined with practices of representation, it is important to have an additional perspective to analyse from in order to compare, contrast and illuminate discourses that have previously remained silent and 'neutral', Indeed, representations or knowledge that claims to be neutral or nestles itself as a part of self-evident assumptions should be questioned and examined for those very reasons (Knights, 1992). Bleiker notes that the aesthetic approach to representation explicitly highlights the political potential of representation and its inherent incompleteness and connection with the perceiver (Bleiker, 2001, p. 511). Indeed, the aesthetic approach embraces the political in attempt to open up and explore this gap between object and representation, in direct contrast to forms of enquiry which seek to limit, close or ignore this gap. Bleiker asserts this is one of the key strengths of the aesthetic, that its insight cannot be attained any other way (Bleiker, 2001, p. 520).

Looking at the cultural artefacts of military videogames, Stahl argues that the constant stream of military videogames that heavily feature themes of American exceptionalism within them, including the popular *Call of Duty*, *Battlefield* and *Medal of Honor* series, act as a cultural vehicle of mobilisation that popularises and naturalises discourses that are consistent with the 'war on terror' (2006). Indeed, these games, which are known for their mind-numbing similarities, act as performative artefacts, constantly reproducing "the Middle East depicted as backward, violent and resistant to civil order" and the West (primarily America) as a "civilising/democratising influence" (Robinson, 2015, p. 452). Analysing this further, Robinson identifies a similar narrative in a number of military games including, *Homefront, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, Battlefield 3* and *Call of Duty: Black Ops* that depict a threatened or victimised America against a hostile other, be it Russians, North Koreans or Iranians. The USA is represented as a unique victim in that it is a constant feature in a hostile world with a unique ability to respond to these constantly changing enemies therefore protecting itself, and by extension, the rest of the world (Robinson, 2015, p. 460). It is not solely the positive representation of America and the negative other at work here, but the helplessness of others, too. In *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* the French state requires American intervention to combat the other, further solidifying the 'world police' representation that neoconservative American foreign policy performs. The constant antagonism towards the USA and the depiction of its military and technological prowess is a cultural reflection, Robinson believes, of exceptionalism that has been present in the unilateral foreign policy of America. The implicit suggestion from the aggressive other is that America is left with no choice but military aggression; "there is no space for dialogue or negotiation with such oppressors" (Robinson, 2015, p. 460). The significance of mediated representational forms of warfare is that the mainstream cultural artefacts and media's articulation of war explicitly attempts to avoid the politics (Behnke & de Carvalho, 2006, p. 935), and rather endeavours to present depoliticised and 'real' depiction of war. As such, mainstream cultural artefacts that depict such discourses fulfil the role perfectly of normalising and perpetuating these pre-constructed and oppressive representations of subjects, states and regions (Neal, 2009, p. 163).

Conclusion

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To summarise, in the first section, I have presented a theoretical overview of the PS-informed understanding of representation, where I highlighted the intrinsic subjectivity of representation, its distortive and social nature, and most importantly, its productive power. It is in the second section that I applied the PS understanding of representation to the problematic and politicised conceptualisations of terrorism and 'the war on terror' and its creation of bare life. In the final section I compounded on this by defining the aesthetic approach which sits upon the PS framework, here I explained how the aesthetic approach emphasised the importance of the 'gap', the difference between representation and the represented, and how it is within this gap where the politics of representation lies. At the end of the same section, I looked at the aesthetic representation of popular military videogames and their construction of the Western self and the foreign other. Throughout this essay I have frequently emphasised how the construction of specific, politicised forms of representations for actions, subjects and states have a critical role in shaping security discourses, much as do security discourses play a critical role in the shaping of objects and subjects. I finally leave the reader with recommendations for further study. Due to a lack of space I could not explore in greater detail examples of aesthetics being applied to world politics. 'Millennium' has published a great deal of this, especially issues 30 (3), 34 (3) and 39 (1). Furthermore, Debrix (2006) analysis of Kantian aesthetic theory, in particular Kant's usage of the sublime, could lend itself well to greater application to the aesthetic turn in IR.

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