Post-structuralist 'critique' and How It Treats Power in Global Politics

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The contention surrounding post-structuralism makes it an interesting theory to study. Few fields have invited as much criticism towards its very principles and methods, which have been chided as failing to "establish any authentic theoretical innovations."[1] In this essay I will examine what 'critique' means in the context of post-structuralism, and will then discuss the post-structural treatment of 'power' in international politics. I will argue that despite its shortcomings, post-structuralism has an important role to play when it comes to interpreting international politics today. Before beginning however, it is important to first define exactly what 'post-structuralism' is.

A label initially created by US academics, 'post-structuralism' refers to a wave of academic output that was largely defined with its opposition to the structuralist movement, which emerged from France during the 1950s to the 1960s. According to Michael Merlingen, structuralism had posited that any social element exists "only in patterned, structured relations linking them to other elements in a system,"[2] and that the most productive way of understanding the social world is to approach it through examination of these systems. *Post*-structuralists, however, seek to challenge this theory and reject its scientific and positivist aspirations. Often making use of techniques of discourse analysis to support their arguments, they believe that language is key and that words and sentences do not reflect or represent any external reality. Bearing in mind the centrality that post-structuralists accord to language, the concept of 'power' is perhaps better understood as a representative phenomenon rather than a concrete, material entity.

As the work of post-structuralists is mainly concerned with challenging the aims and motives of existing theories and discourses, it is perhaps more accurate to think of post-structuralism in the field of international politics as a *method* or *tool of analysis.* This is particularly because, as it is examined throughout this essay, post-structuralism generally does not seek to present a specific worldview of its own. In other words, it is only by looking at how post-structuralists engage in providing critique over other viewpoints that we can really begin to understand how they think. As Michel Foucault argues, post-structuralist critique "only exists in relation to something other than itself."[3] With this in mind, this paper will assess the nature and motivation of post-structuralist critique with particular reference to its interaction with the concept of 'state sovereignty'.

How does 'critique' differ from 'criticism'?

"Do you know up to what point you can know?",[4] once asked the French writer Michel Foucault. His question encapsulates the essence of post-structuralism, as the very act of posing it instantly challenges existing structures of knowledge and thus becomes an act of 'critique'. Yet where post-structuralism is concerned, the terms 'critique' and 'criticism' should not necessarily be used interchangeably. According to Judith Butler, Foucault viewed 'critique' as a practice that "suspends judgment" and "offer[s] a new practice of values based on that very suspension."[5] In other words, post-structuralists do not seek to make value judgements when they engage in critique. They believe that to make such judgments or to suggest a replacement action or thought, one surely has to be operating from within (and thus accepting) an existing framework of generally agreed boundaries, definitions and principles. Through 'critique', however, the goal of the post-structuralist is rather to engage in a kind of critical thinking that problematizes and destabilizes a framework that would otherwise be taken for granted, thereby making room for the possibility of a new

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reality (or set of realities). In short, post-structural critique differs from standard 'criticism' because it seeks to *problematize* rather than *replace*. William Connolly says this is because the post-structuralist thinker "swims in the culture" that establishes social settings, and so it is simply not possible for him to establish a space outside this culture.[6] All too aware that they are a product of their own environments, post-structuralists can do not more than suggest we *try* and think of other possibilities.

Post-structuralists believe that language is key when seeking to explain the social world. They argue that there is no reality external to the language we use. They draw inspiration from Nietzsche who, as cited in Bleiker & Chou, argued that "when we say something about the world we also inevitably say something about our conception of the world – something that is linked not to the facts and phenomena we try to comprehend but to the assumptions and conventions of knowing that we have acquired over time and that have become codified in language."[7] They believe that all aspects of the human experience are fundamentally textual. So, for post-structuralists, critiquing a text and/or a discourse is to critique the *world itself*.

Much post-structuralist critique is concerned with identifying the presence of binaries and dichotomies. Jacques Derrida argues that the very structure of thought in the Western tradition was drawn from such binary oppositions; in other words, things are defined largely by what they are *not*.[8] The colour red is *red* in large part because it is not blue, green or any other colour. Post-structuralists claim to show that the deployment of these binaries penetrates to the very core of political life. Concerning the field of IR, Connolly argues that 'international relations' as we know and aspire to understand them today were largely compounded from the "intertext between the old world and the new."[9] He highlights the historical context within which these relations were formed, having drawn much of their character from "time-honored practices in Christianity," which relied on a process of *othering* when it encountered someone or something considered deviant from the faith. Connolly believes that we can only truly understand what he calls the "enigma of otherness" if we look at the epistemological context whence it emerged in the sixteenth century, and that by doing so we can begin to challenge it.[10] Connolly adds that the use of binaries, beginning with couples such as faith/heresy, purity/sin, monotheism/paganism and conquest/conversion, seeped from this Christian context into secular academic life through the vehicle of an ambiguous "must"; the command structure of an indefinable but completely 'sovereign' bearer of truth.[11] Most post-structuralists would likely argue that this same device is still being deployed today in the name of the sovereign state.

By tracing the use of binary oppositions and other linguistic devices from the late-medieval Christian context to the present day, Connolly, Jacques Derrida and the other similar thinkers have employed what is known as the *genealogical method*. By using genealogy post-structuralists seek to interrogate pieces of knowledge, to ask where they originated and who they benefit. Connolly's ideas follow on from those of Foucault who, according to Mariana Valverde, believed that the concept of sovereignty was first promoted by "highly political" European thinkers who "lacked the independence and disinterestedness" of the "autonomous universities" that twentieth-century political theorists would go on to enjoy.[12] Foucault argued that these thinkers on sovereignty had vested interests in defending particular institutions, which at the time fell under the auspices of the monarchy. Foucault believed that despite the profound political changes that have occurred since these ideas on sovereignty were initially formed, the dominance of the 'sovereign voice' has endured: "the representation of power has remained under the spell of monarchy. In political thought and analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king."[13] By highlighting the late-medieval origins of the concept of sovereignty, Foucault claims to have called into question its perceived timelessness and its suitability as a staple element of today's political system.

Foucault wrote that "there is something in critique that is akin to virtue" and "this critical attitude [is] virtue in general."[14] He believed that post-structural genealogical critique was not simply an exercise in knowledge, but also played an important ethical role. Valverde argues that Foucault's main purpose was "to provide a genealogy of discourses of/on sovereignty that could be used to shed light on those phenomena in twentieth-century political history that loomed over Foucault's generation," which included "state-organised mass murders of whole human groups declared to be enemies not just of the state but of the nation itself."[15] Foucault sees post-structural critique, then, as a way to hold those in power to account. As Judith Butler suggests: "perhaps what he is offering us by way of 'critique' is an act, even a practice of freedom."[16]

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Another method oft-employed by post-structuralists is that of the *double reading*. This involves an analysis of a discourse or theory in two parts: firstly, a reading which takes the subject matter at face value and interprets it in the way the author intends it to be understood; and secondly, a reading which challenges the subject matter, asks who it may benefit and explores what it neglects to mention. According to Richard Devetak these mutually inconsistent readings are in "a performative (rather than logical) contradiction," as the goal of the double reading is not to demonstrate truth but to "expose how any story depends on the repression of internal tensions in order to produce a stable effect of homogeneity and continuity."[17]

Richard Ashley is one post-structuralist writer who has used the method of double reading to critique the sovereign state and the wider realist paradigm, which he refers to as the *anarchy problématique*. Ashley claims that his first reading of the paradigm has the characteristics of a monologue, in that it allows the controlling sovereign presence to have "an existence prior to and independent of the representations" and is "fixed and originary."[18] Ashley argues that allowing the discourse under analysis to hold unquestioned dominance sets up a dilemma for the reader, because he/she is "left *either* to enter the enclosure of a discourse and honour its powerful representations of a problematique *or* to stand aloof."[19] By contrast, Ashley's second reading of the *anarchy problématique* has the characteristics of a dialogue, as the reader will "be disposed to explore how practices involved in the production of a text or discourse move to absorb and destroy, affirm and negate, anticipate and answer an innumerable variety of alien texts in an ambiguous, indeterminate, and productive dialogue."[20] By carrying out this double reading, Ashley claims not to have *destroyed* the discourse but to have *deconstructed* it, giving "an opening to new possibilities where formerly there was only the pretence of closure."[21] In Jonathan Culler's words, this technique of deconstruction "undermines the philosophy it asserts… by identifying in the text the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground of argument, the key concept or premise."[22] The boundaries of the discourse are called into question and space is created for further debate because, according to Ashley, it is show that the foundations of the discourse "were never so secure as they might have seemed."[23] Through Ashley's performative double reading, the locus of sovereign power has allegedly been destabilised.

The 'power/knowledge nexus'

Marking a departure from mainstream positivist scholarship in IR, post-structuralists treat the production of knowledge as an "aesthetic, normative and political matter."[24] Their emphasis on the essentiality of language in the production of knowledge means that language becomes, in Devetak's words, "less a neutral, pure medium of communication, than a mediating set of habits, conventions, values and prejudices enabling us to make sense of the world."[25] Viewed through this lens, knowledge and power thus become intertwined in what Foucault calls a "nexus of knowledge-power,"[26] where the two are "mutually supportive" and "directly imply one another."[27] As Valverde argues, Foucault's use of post-structuralist genealogy was down to his interest in "writing the history of political thought not as a history of ideas but as a history of power struggles."[28]

Derrida saw deconstruction as a key tool for breaking into the perceived intimate relationship between power and knowledge and for locating "elements of instability" that threaten the cohesion of conceptual oppositions in general.[29] Crucially, he believed that although both halves of any binary initially seem to be equal to one another, one conceptual partner is in fact more powerful and dominates the other. Viewed in this way, deconstruction is also a useful method for analysing power dynamics. One pairing Derrida was especially concerned with was that of 'speech/writing'. Rather than being two equal branches of language, Derrida posited that speech was in fact widely regarded as "primary and authentic" and writing merely a derivative of it. He argues that rather than thinking of writing as a poorer relation of speech we should treat *speech* as if it were part of a generalised form of *writing*.[30]

Jenny Edkins and Maja Zehfuss argue that a parallel can be drawn with the power struggle of the 'sovereign domestic/anarchic international' binary in global politics, where the international is always set up to fail when viewed through the criteria of a 'sovereign' domestic system of order that is already considered superior. They imagine that if we were to conceive of an alternative interpretation of world politics without the dividing lines of domestic/international (inside/outside the sovereign entity), the location and nature of power would change drastically. They envision a world where "the idea of homogenous groups of people sharing common values and a common culture over time would not be taken as given."[31] This not only debunks the primordial

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domestic/international dichotomy, but also challenges other, accompanying ones such as inside/outside, good/evil, order/chaos, secure/insecure, legal/illegal, and so on – all of which are used to reinforce the dominant power of one of the two partners. Using the example of 9/11 and the ensuing 'War on Terror', Edkins and Zehfuss claim that although the US government described the US as less secure than before the attacks, it was in fact experiencing a *return* of a security not experienced since the end of the Cold War because it once again had a clearly-identifiable enemy ("Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists"[32]). They argue the US government exploited this to its power advantage, justifying heightened securitisation 'at home' and military activities 'abroad'.[33]

The work of Edkins and Zehfuss rings true with the belief of many post-structuralists that the sovereign state is, as David Campbell writes, "predicated on discourses of danger."[34] Many post-structuralists believe the ruling classes in a sovereign state reinforce their power through deployment of the inside/outside paradigm.[35] Rather than being 'originary' and having an existence prior to political practice, post-structuralists believe that sovereign states are "performatively constituted."[36] This also fits in with the concept of 'virtue' that Foucault saw in post-structural critique. Jennifer Sterling-Folker argues that through critiquing sovereignty, post-structuralists want to show how the current setup of global politics engenders the "subjugation and social injustices that are uncritically and continually reproduced as if they were inevitable."[37] As Foucault writes, "critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth."[38]

Conclusion

Mervyn Frost has claimed that post-structuralists' concern with the location of power means they would be more accurately described as "super-realists."[39] While he may have a point, this overlooks the key difference that while realists claim that their theory acts as a mirror reflecting a pre-existing and static reality, post-structuralists are sceptical of the very 'realities' presented by discourses and theories in mainstream IR and encourage use to view the world differently. It could be argued that post-structuralism's concern with problematizing existing theories of reality is a severe flaw because it effectively leaves them homeless, having lost a base from whence to formulate useful thoughts and ideas. It could also be asked: "what good is thinking otherwise, if we don't know in advance that thinking otherwise will produce a better world?"[40] However, in response to this it should be stressed that post-structuralists are not seeking to form new ethical guidelines. As Butler writes, "I think we can assume that the answers that are being proffered do not have reassurance as their primary aim."[41]

As this paper has shown, post-structuralists are merely introducing the mere possibility of viewing international politics from a different starting point – a possibility that is disallowed by many positivist strands in the social sciences. This paper has also shown that post-structuralists are effective in highlighting the complex and intimate relationship between knowledge and power; the malleability of the former acting largely to reinforce the latter. In doing so, they claim to have questioned the relevance of the sovereign state, considered by many the only legitimate actor in international relations today. Even if, as Blair claims, post-structuralism does not present any concrete "theoretical innovations" in IR, its methods nonetheless encourage us to think outside the constrains of traditional paradigms.[42] In the context of the largely unpredicted political changes that have occurred over the past year especially, this open-minded attitude is perhaps as much needed now as ever.

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