

## Review - The Politics of Subjectivity in American Foreign Policy Discourses

Written by Stephen Michael Christian

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

# Review - The Politics of Subjectivity in American Foreign Policy Discourses

<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/06/04/review-the-politics-of-subjectivity-in-american-foreign-policy-discourses/>

STEPHEN MICHAEL CHRISTIAN, JUN 4 2017

***The Politics of Subjectivity in American Foreign Policy Discourses*  
By Ty Solomon  
University of Michigan Press, 2015**

Ty Solomon's *The Politics of Subjectivity in American Foreign Policy Discourses* is an ambitious project for international relations (IR) theory. Solomon sets out to answer a pertinent question for discourse analysts: why do some political discourses work better in persuading others than competing discourses? Solomon makes two claims. First, discourses are successful when they emotionally appeal to actors' desire for a fulfilled self-identity. For understanding the relations between desire, subjectivity, and discourse, Solomon postulates that Jacques Lacan and Ernesto Laclau's theories are insightful. Solomon's contribution to IR, in contrast to other constructivist approaches, is in demonstrating how it is not merely the presence of an Other which leads to problems of self—actors' selves are "*always already* unstable and insecure" (p. 15; emphasis in original) insofar that the subject is always lacking a full identity. Second, Lacanian theories of insecure identities can elucidate important insights on the United States' foreign policy in the War on Terror and the closely related neoconservative movement (pp. 1-15).

Solomon summarizes many of Lacan's ideas, notorious for their obscurity, with much clarity that someone with the modicum understanding of psychoanalysis will have little trouble understanding them. Solomon then synthesizes these concepts into the useful Lacanian schematic of the "four discourses" (p. 51)—Master, Hysteric, University, and Analyst—that IR scholars can use to identify, in any narrative, the roles of the Agent, the Other it addresses, the Product of the address, and the Truth the agent speaks from. Depending on the kind of narrative analyzed, these four roles will consist of certain arrangement of a "Master Signifier" (p. 27) (a signifier that acts as a basis for knowledge), a "System of Knowledge" (p. 55) (the signifiers tied to the Master Signifier), a "Split Subject" (p. 41) (a Subject with some sort of lack), and an "object *a*" (some "Thing" (p. 36) that will supposedly complete a Subject which cannot be effectively communicated through discourse). With Laclau, Solomon demonstrates how Lacan's ideas help understand what creates and undermines the political hegemonies and "common sense" (p. 67) that serve (or fail to serve) subjects' emotions (pp. 25-69).

Just as ambitious as tackling Lacan's obtuseness is applying a Lacan/Laclau synthesis to understanding American foreign policy around two otherwise exhausted topics researched by mainstream and critical IR scholars alike: the War on Terror and American neoconservatism. By focusing on the emotional reasons people might accept certain discourses, Solomon's case studies focus on key texts that political leaders and foreign policy experts have produced—and the roles they play in political hegemony in America. In chapter two, Solomon focuses on how the War on Terror discourse became hegemonic. Solomon argues that the Bush administration's rhetoric was successful because it provided a fantasy for distraught Americans enjoyment through pursuing a jingoistic foreign policy of combating terrorism around the world. Rival discourses, exemplified by former presidential candidate John Kerry, made too many ideological concessions to the War on Terror discourse to be able to actually challenge it (pp. 71-111).

# Review - The Politics of Subjectivity in American Foreign Policy Discourses

Written by Stephen Michael Christian

In chapters three and four, Solomon concentrates on neoconservatism's popularity during the 1970s and its decline and resurrection during the 1990s. Early neoconservative writers gained intellectual clout by portraying the Soviet Union as a villainous Other exploiting America's current weaknesses. America, these writers concluded, must confront the Soviets with a values-driven, active, and interventionist foreign policy. But during the early 1990s, where there was no widely-perceived existential threat to American hegemony, neoconservatism's influence waned. Solomon believes that this decline is exemplified in Charles Krauthammer's "The Unipolar Moment," which fails to portray American identity as lacking much of anything. However, the neoconservative movement later that decade had been jolted by new ideas, many of which drew from intellectuals like William Kristol and Robert Kagan and think tanks like the Project of the New American Century. Neoconservatives successfully portrayed America as the world leader that required instituting its values in a post-Cold War world to control new threats like China and rogue states from destabilizing this fragile world order (pp. 113-203).

Intriguing throughout, this book will be an excellent introduction for students interested in how psychoanalytic ideas and emotions are applicable to international politics and foreign policy. Furthermore, many theorists interested in ontological security literature (e.g. Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008; Zarakol 2010; Rumelili 2015) might find Solomon's account of Lacanian ideas useful for finding potential overlap and contradictions between Lacan's ideas and those of ontological security theorists. Both Solomon and ontological security theorists provide theories of a collective Self and how that self-identity can drive a state's foreign policy decisions. While Solomon focuses on the role of *lack*, ontological security theorists focus on the role of *continuity* in one's sense of self. Elaborating on how these theories compliment and contradict one another should be a fruitful area of research.

However, Solomon's portrayal of neoconservative discourse may mislead readers to think that it was the only influential discourse that lent to adventurist American foreign policy during the War on Terror. Many other discourses, such as some realist and neoliberal ones, have been used to justify the United States' foreign policy. This is somewhat addressed vis-à-vis Kerry, but Solomon does not emphasize how many neoliberals and realists, through their interactions with neoconservative discourses, may end up unconsciously identifying with these neoconservative ideas and adjust their discourses accordingly. A more thorough analysis of hegemonic discourses requires also analyzing ostensibly, though not necessarily, counter-hegemonic discourses.

## References

- Mitzen, J. (2006, December). Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma. *European Journal of International Relations*, 12(3), 341-70.
- Rumelili, B. (Ed.). (2015). *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties*. New York, New York, United States of America: Routledge.
- Solomon, T. (2015). *The Politics of Subjectivity in American Foreign Policy Discourses*. Ann Arbor, Michigan, United States of America: University of Michigan Press.
- Steele, B. J. (2008). *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*. London: Routledge.
- Zarakol, A. (2010). Ontological (In)security and State Denial of Historical Crimes: Turkey and Japan. *International Relations*, 24(1), 3-23.

---

## About the author:

Stephen Michael Christian studied at the University of Utah and has a BA in political science from Georgia Gwinnett College. Michael focuses on incorporating disability studies into international political theory. The European Journal

## **Review - The Politics of Subjectivity in American Foreign Policy Discourses**

Written by Stephen Michael Christian

of International Relations recently published his article Autism in International Relations.