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A Critical Evaluation of Poststructuralism's Contribution to Security

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This paper seeks to critically evaluate poststructuralism's contribution to our understanding of security, in a manner that is self-aware to its nuances and open to the style of critique and interpretation that has inspired poststructuralism's acceptance into International Relations (IR). Poststructuralism is not finite, does not have clear boundaries or sharp edges like many orthodox and critical theories, it can even be paradoxical at times. A traditional black and white, non-descriptive evaluation of strengths and weaknesses, although invaluable in a wide array of circumstances, feels both a disservice to poststructuralism, and disingenuous to its purpose. If anything, poststructuralism operates far beyond black and white goalposts, and is most comfortable in the grey area in-between. With reference to security, this essay will examine in-depth and engage with poststructuralism's primary concepts, including language, power, discourse, metanarratives, genealogy and deconstruction. It will elucidate how these concepts offer the flexibility and reflexivity to be applied to a range of security concepts and current examples. This paper will also identify some of the main criticisms that are deployed against poststructuralism. Finally, the essay will briefly consider how poststructuralist concepts can be applied to the current security climate using Russia as a case study, to demonstrate, that despite at times appearing impracticably philosophical, poststructuralism has enormous scope to contribute to contemporary security.

Poststructuralism technically speaking, does not exist. It differs from other approaches to IR because it does not see itself as a theory or school of thought that produces a single account of its subject matter (Bleiker and Campbell, 2016). The founding philosophers and scholars of poststructuralist thought never came together and formed a cohesive school of the same name. Poststructuralism instead refers to a collection of concepts born out of 1960's French social theory (Wenman, 2017). Its retrospective epistemological construction and the ways key poststructuralist authors (Cixous, Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Guattari, Irigaray and Lyotard to name a few) have since been studied, classified and compartmentalised is perhaps an indication of the way poststructuralism's reception has been conditioned, confirming that it is indeed important, and that it is here to stay (Dillet, 2017).

As poststructuralism's direct predecessor, structuralism was naturally responsible for shaping many of its salient features (Lundy, 2013). In Parisian intellectual circles of the 1960s, structuralism was the popular and avant-garde model of the day (Harcourt, 2007), a method that was moulded by Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (Lundy, 2013). Poststructuralism would follow to be deeply Saussurean too. Both give primacy to language at the centre of their world view, and not just writing and speech, but the moment we impose meaning in the gap or 'slippage' between our mind and the world. They explain that there is no absolute truth that can be found through language, it is infinitely subjective, and words do not have universal meaning (Harcourt, 2007). They reject the empiricist and logocentric (Pada, 2007) interpretation that language is a transparent medium, and instead a structural network of 'signs' that are given meaning by differentiation. Language therefore supersedes the human being as the source of meaning. We can no longer be understood as independent agents interpreting the world through language and experience because this is a construction of discourse (Roy, c2017).

Structuralism sought to approach social relations from new angles and to escape from academic restrictions by changing the terms and conditions for understanding the human experience. Essential to this was its quest for scientificity, and replacement of subjective conjecture with objective truth in the social domain (Lundy, 2013). This

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desire for scientificity was driven by Marxism and Stalinism, and the credibility of these movements being severely undermined by political events at the time. The cynicism of ideology opened a door for Structuralism, as a striking means to move away from untenable ideologies. But this pursuit for scientificity would fail, the lack of validity and rigour of its scientific process would be exposed by critics and largely abandoned by poststructuralists (Ibid).

Poststructuralists argue that objective truth is inaccessible, and inexistent in language. Reality is only comprehensible through language, as is our conscious self, and the quest for absolute objective truth is futile (Roy, c2017). Poststructuralism therefore, and most importantly, empowers critique of the self-evidences of representation (Merlingen, 2013). It sees critique as an inherently positive exercise that flushes out the assumptions through which conventional and dominant understandings have come to be, challenging the 'common sense' and 'taken for granted' assumptions about reality which many traditional theories of IR have relied upon, and establishes the conditions of possibility for pursuing alternatives. In this framework, poststructuralism targets other IR theories as one of its objects of analysis, and approaches those paradigms with questions designed to expose how they are structured. The result of this poststructuralist analysis, is itself an interpretation, and as such can, and should, be subject to the same ethos of critique that gave rise to it (Bleiker and Campbell, 2016).

In establishing the value of poststructural thought, and the contribution of its style of critique and analysis to our understanding of security, it is useful to deconstruct what really makes theory valuable. In the words of statistician George Box's (1979) most famous aphorism, "all models are wrong, but some are useful", a somewhat poststructuralist statement, bearing resemblance to Lyotard's suspicion of metanarratives, and has some interesting applications to IR. Despite its reference originally to statistical and mathematical models, this statement has since been applied to wide-ranging schools of thought, everything from ultramarathon training to social theory. It isolates, in one sentence, that the real-world is too complex to be modelled correctly and that the utility of models are what give them value. It allows us to look at a controllable number of inputs to produce an output of academic or real-world applicability. The application varies between each model, but provides a lens or framework in which to view, understand, deconstruct or critique the world. A common criticism of poststructuralism is that it does very little to propose solutions (Hanson, 2017). However, its usefulness really lies in its reflectivity and inquiry into unquestioned truths, and the meanings that have been applied to key notions of security by leading theories in the positivist tradition. A requirement to offer solutions should not be the sole obligation of social theory. Theoretical contribution should be based on utility, and the means to view and understand the world, of which poststructuralism fits very soundly.

Poststructuralism entered into the foray of IR and by extension Security Studies in the 1980s through the work of Ashley, Der Derian, Shapiro and Walker (Ibid). Since Saussure's linguistic breakthrough, discourse has been increasingly scrutinised by scholars, and the analysis of discourse reached IR firmly in the 1990s under the driving forces of Neumann, Linklater and Campbell. This focus on discourse corresponded with the end of the Cold War, and the failure of rationalist theories to forecast the breakdown of the bipolar system (Hällström, 2017). Since then, applying poststructuralist thought to Security has almost unlimited utility. As Dillet (2017, pp. 517) notes, poststructuralism has contributed enormously to research in social sciences and the humanities over the last 30 years, and its value can be found as a theoretical exercise that reworks the relation between theory and practice, giving primacy to issues and events over solutions and historical continuities.

A primary problem for poststructuralist scholars is that narrative and discourse always encompasses power. It is argued that this has become naturalised in our normal use of language, and we have become so accustomed to power that we fail to experience it (Thomassen, 2017). The traditional understanding of power within IR is the practice of top-down coercion – getting someone to do something they wouldn't otherwise have done (Sadan, 2004). The dialogue surrounding power in poststructuralist IR, however, is heavily Foucauldian (Thomassen, 2017) and, as such, influence has been drawn between social theories, here namely poststructuralism to the Paris School of Security Studies. Poststructuralist power is harder to identify, is more influential, and is inextricably linked to knowledge. Power is always a function of knowledge, and knowledge is an exercise of power (Rouse, 2005). Power has the capacity to determine what is normal and can naturalise specific social orders. In social orders there are 'winners' and 'losers', by determining this and making everyone recognise it as the natural order, power in theory can be unlimited. Additionally, poststructuralist power is intersubjective and instead of being a top-down practice, is

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internalised in an individual's subjectivity (Ibid).

An example of this within security discourse is Islamist terrorism, a highly polarised debate currently. On one side, a right-wing opinion might suggest that Islamic aggression is found within scripture, there is a systematic spreading of Sharia law, and evidence of the exportation of terror to 'conquer the West', to name a few arguments. On the other, left-leaning opinions may suggest that Islam is an intrinsically peaceful religion, that 'Muslim States' are behind the West in terms of gender equality and emancipation, and that we are failing to engage with young disenfranchised Muslims at home. Naturalised orthodox discourse places these two opinions at either side of the spectrum, but for poststructuralism, those positions are almost identical (Ree, 2014). Both present Islam as a problem that requires a solution, whether that be through engagement or hard control measures. They both see the 'West' as superior to some degree, and that problems associated with Islam are the West's responsibility to pacify or develop Islam. Furthermore, there is clear overtone of 'them' and 'us'. The discourse may create bipolar opinions, but the terms themselves hold the power and create the power relations between the West and Islam (Ibid). Importantly, polarity is not required for power relations to be developed, it just makes the gap easier to identify. Poststructuralist power can be applied to any discourse within security to further, or more appropriately, de-naturalise and critique our ontological position on narratives. Examples of these are immigration, conflict, crime, punishment and state-surveillance to just scratch the surface. Even the concept of security can be critiqued indefinitely, identifying power relations between states, individuals and non-state actors in as many alignments as one's creativity allows.

Foucault further developed the concept through his thoughts on the historical growth of power and institutional production of discourse (Chouliaraki, 2010). Originally, this was applied directly to Panopticism and deviance (Sheridan, 2016), however this was extended to the concept of 'Governmentality' as the preeminent form of power. Governmentality seeks to influence a population to behave in a certain way, once again not coercive power, but the mitigation of certain behaviours, which of course fits within both IR and security's remit. Foucault writes that modern institutions naturalise certain social orders as a means to measure and judge deviance (Chouliaraki, 2010). They measure how closely an individual relates to the norm and create a problem if that norm is not upheld, which is practiced institutionally through surveillance. This happens on an enormous scale in institutions such as the military, prisons, police and intelligence services as primary examples in the field of security. Foucault then developed and moved discourse analysis into a more political terrain through 'Genealogy'. Genealogy proposes that we are historically produced, shaped by power relationships and surveillance to a point that we become self-surveilling (Harcourt, 2007). Self-surveillance is, again, originally a concept of Panopticism that has since been extended. It states that we have taken over the role of the state and institutions and instead self-discipline ourselves to mitigate deviancy and uphold naturalised social orders that have been dictated by power. Genealogy explains that we are not free agents. Our subjectivity and perception of the world is one that we feel free to act and do as we please because we have stored our self-surveillance in our subconscious (Ibid).

Another significant concept in poststructuralism was Jean-Francois Lyotard's 'incredulity towards metanarratives' covered in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Lyotard described this scepticism to metanarratives as a condition of the postmodern condition, coining 'postmodernism' for the first time in the social sciences (Hutcheon, 1989). Although postmodernism and poststructuralism are often used interchangeably, postmodern analysis is more specifically a literary critique in most situations (Ree, 2014). Lyotard identified himself as postmodern and, much like Derrida, has been compartmentalised into the poststructuralist camp. Metanarratives are simply narratives about narratives, descriptions that give meaning to our collective being and function as a foundation of culture – metanarratives are naturalised interpretive frameworks that give meaning. Critically, they involve understanding the world in absolutes and universals, they persist over long periods of time and carry considerable power to influence people (Ibid). An excellent and widely used example is religion, for example Christianity and Islam. Religion gives a wide-ranging and compelling understanding of the world in which there is absolute good and absolute evil, universal justice and truth. Science, in the same vein, is equivalent because it produces understanding in absolute and universal terms. This is, once again, an example of polarity becoming irrelevant to power. British Philosopher John Gray (2004, pp.3-4) is critical of the metanarrative of 'progress' which has dominated human history and is a scale by which civilisations are judged, writing that:

"The core of the idea of progress is the belief that human life becomes better with the growth of knowledge. The

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error is not in thinking that human life can improve. Rather, it is imagining that improvement can ever be cumulative. Unlike science, ethics and politics are not activities in which what is learnt in one generation can be passed on to an indefinite number of future generations. Like the arts, they are practical skills and they are easily lost”.

Ree (2014) describes progress and other similar narratives as ‘automatic’. He gives further examples of individualism, justice, instrumentalism and freedom. Metanarratives in security that are promising candidates include the Cold War and the ‘War on Terror’ which, compared to religion, have less longevity, but are inescapable and powerful enough globally to make a compelling case as metanarratives. Callinicos (1991) and Habermas (1981) have criticised the postmodern condition as being internally inconsistent. That absolute incredulity towards metanarratives is itself a metanarrative that is self-refuting. Critiquing universal rules, yet postulating that postmodernity or poststructuralism contains universal scepticism, is paradoxical. Yet, as previously stated, poststructuralism is itself an interpretation, and should welcome the same critique it empowers, in this case, its own metanarrative interpretation.

Poststructuralism therefore seeks to unpick metanarratives, as the idea that we have access to universal truth through these is problematic. They are mistaken for factual and real which, in turn, makes us lose sight of the power-relations they create (Sheridan, 2016). Jacques Derrida produced a solution and was the founder of ‘deconstruction’, poststructuralism’s answer to metanarratives. Derridean deconstruction seeks to ‘de-naturalise’ narratives and to see as much as possible behind the discourse we use and subscribe to (Harcourt, 2007). Deconstruction is, however, much larger than just metanarratives, it seeks to deconstruct language as a whole – the power it carries, the power-relations it produces and the constructed narratives that encompass all of these concepts and become so naturalised (Chouliaraki, 2010). Poststructuralist examination and analysis is therefore cyclical: The investigation of language’s ambiguities and as Derrida calls ‘Différance’, that which gives meaning and makes language possible (Harcourt, 2007): Examination of the power this carries and the power-relations it creates: Scrutiny of the narratives and discourse which shape social structures and influences our self-surveillance: Leading back to attempted de-naturalisation and deconstruction, figuratively re-starting the cycle. Deconstruction is both confirmatory and destructive, a perhaps empathetic appraisal of how and why language is constructed, to then be untangled as much as possible, even if we have a limited capacity to do so (Ibid).

Poststructuralist concepts and discourse are frequently criticised as being complex, over-written, and an example of academic navel-gazing (Lundy, 2013). However, as this essay argues, poststructuralism’s contribution to security lies within its scope to critique and question, exploring areas that other schools of thought dare not tread. Western narratives and discourse regarding Russia may be an excellent example of this. Russia is one of the most contentious and prominent questions in the current security landscape and is an issue that has exposed a widespread degradation of Western expertise. Discourse is plagued by binary discussion and the Russian narrative is viewed through a Western lens, leading to contradictory and irrational assumptions (Bacon, 2017). Andrew Monaghan (2017, xii) has made a robust and innovative argument that although Russia likely poses a legitimate threat to NATO, the West’s ability to understand Russia could have the largest security implications, not the Kremlin’s foreign policy. Poststructuralism is not only a toolkit to deconstruct our commonly held and potentially dangerous assumptions we make about Russian intent, but could have legitimate implications for our security understanding and ability to cooperate in the future.

An example of a contemporary ‘automatic’ metanarrative, like aforementioned ‘progress’, is found in Monaghan’s (2017, pp. 16) analysis of Western discourse about present day Russia. He writes that mainstream Western narratives surrounding Russia are heavily ethnocentric and feature a progressive historical template. Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a false understanding in the West of Russian convergence and the ‘return to the Western family of nations’. This is known as ‘transitionology’ and has been heavily featured in Russia Studies and both US and British debates for almost 30 years, sufficient longevity and impact on understanding and foreign policy for consideration as a metanarrative. This is an example of a ‘common sense’ assumption that links closely to the failure of rationalist theories to forecast the breakdown of the bipolar system by framing Russian issues through a western lens, creating power-relations between Russia and the West. It is also an excellent example of a much broader issue, that our current narratives are not beneficial for understanding Russia or for creating a more secure environment. Russia has not converged with the West, and looks currently no closer to doing so, despite the

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conventional understanding that it 'should'. In this situation, poststructuralism would be well utilised to recognise how this rational understanding is resting on faith and, through genealogy, how and where that leap was taken to arrive at the conclusion, and at what cost (Harcourt, 2007). If this was done for every narrative regarding Russian aggression, it could just help the West get Russia a little more 'right' (Monaghan, 2017).

Poststructuralism's contribution to IR and by extension our understanding of security has been well documented over the last three decades. Poststructuralism has the apparatus to explain how our rational beliefs about security concepts and issues have come to be. It identifies the 'leaps of faith' in our conclusions that are no more grounded in evidence than religious faith, emancipating agents to engage with and construct discourse inside a clearer framework. Poststructuralist application to contemporary security issues can certainly identify problems, but will not offer up clear solutions, and, as such, cannot be used in isolation to counter insecurity. Some would identify this as a weakness though, in the case of Russia, effectively interpreting an escalating political situation is becoming critical. To that end, poststructuralism undoubtedly has scope to develop our understanding of security, both in wider concepts and specific issues. Poststructuralism's exact utility is understandably problematic to quantify for many. Its grounding in both sociology and philosophy leads to a framework, which in isolation does not achieve much, and from an outsider's perspective can appear to be excessively dense. It is a tool with parameters that extend far beyond most schools of thought, and is therefore heavily reliant on its user, requiring a highly creative and open-minded approach. It is not an approach for the tentative or those who prefer hand-holding. Though, if a user can successfully navigate through poststructuralist discourse and de-naturalise themselves from the assumptions that other theories define as objectively true, then poststructuralist concepts can be applied to any subject as far as the user's imagination allows. Resultingly, poststructuralism is very well placed centrally in the study of International Relations and security for those who are open and willing to engage with its ideas in full.

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