

# Postmodernism and security challenges in the developing world

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/03/06/do-postmodernists-have-anything-meaningful-to-say-about-the-security-challenges-facing-societies-in-the-developing-world/>

ALVARO MELLADO DOMINGUEZ, MAR 6 2011

### **Do postmodernists have anything meaningful to say about the security challenges facing societies in the developing world?**

Postmodernism is “seeking out and challenging the endlessly unfolding relationship between knowledge and power, rejecting metanarratives and the Enlightenment project, and seeing ‘truth’ as a temporary social construction limited in time and space” (Acharya A. et al 2010:9-10). This definition of postmodernism can help us to understand the approach of this essay. It attempts to provide different ideas in the security debate related to societies in the developing world. Firstly, the role of discourses is analysed and its impact on the security of societies in the developing world. Secondly, it examines the construction of knowledge and the different narratives that can define the knowledge and the representation of the reality. Based on this previous analysis, this second part analyses how security is constructed and the danger that societies in the developing world can have with the manipulation in the perception of risk and danger. Thirdly, the concept biopolitics is used to examine the construction of identities as the different and the other in order to uncover the problems that interventionism in the name of humanity brings to societies in the developing world.

For postmodernists, discourses are the vehicles to reality. David Campbell defined discourse as “the representation and constitution of the real” (Campbell D. 1998:7). This can suggest that the knowledge of reality will depend on how we perceive it and how we represent reality. Therefore, truth and knowledge can be perceived as socially constructed depending on the space, time and the power relations among the different discourses of reality (Acharya A. et al 2010:10). For example, Nelson Mandela was considered a terrorist by conservative British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and years later he was considered “one of the greatest men alive” by conservative British Prime Minister David Cameron (Grice A 2006). On the one hand, all these different perceptions of the reality may lead to the interpretation that discourse and language are everything and there is not real awareness of reality (Campbell D. 1998:7). On the other hand, Øyvind Østerud sees this postmodernist questioning of knowledge as abstract, confusing and lacking of consistence to establish a serious approach for international relations (Østerud Ø 1996 :389). However, postmodernists highlighted the importance of power relations among the different discourses of the reality to make security discourses as “plays of power which mobilize rules, codes and procedures to assert a particular understanding, through the construction of knowledge’ (Dalby S., 1988: 416). Discourses can be important because they can be a vehicle to mobilise people towards war by specific representations of the reality, for instance: radio mobilisation directed to Hutu ethnic groups by the identification of Tutsi ethnic groups as cockroaches and as a problem for the country before the Rwandan genocide in 1994. Postmodernist approach to discourse analysis can be a useful tool for conflict analysis and understanding social group interactions, especially in developing countries where there is a great diversity of ethnic identities. Vivienne Jabri defines the aim of discourse analysis as “to locate the structures of signification and legitimating which are drawn and reproduced by actors in the structuration of war as a social continuity” (Jabri V. 1996:91). Jabri aimed to uncover how actors articulate discourses and how wars are legitimised in the discourses. This can help us in the understanding of legitimating of war as an alternative to resolve conflicts by certain groups. However, discourses can not be seen as only explanation to understand conflict.

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From a neorealist perspective, John J. Mearsheimer emphasises the relevance of structural factors over discourses and the importance of the structural factors influencing states and the international system (Mearsheimer J.J 1994-95:40). In this regard, Vivienne Jabri argued that discourses and group behaviour towards war are embedded in a social context. This social context can define the discourses and the interactions of the different groups towards wars as the same way the discourses and the interaction can define the social context (Jabri V. 1996:172). Therefore, the use of discourse analysis can not be based only on language and communication. It also requires the understanding of the social context and the different social groups. Discourse analysis would need other social disciplines and tools in order to understand the embedded context in which discourses are integrated. For instance, discourse analysis in the previous Rwanda example would require an understanding of the political context, identity formation process, economic factors, interactions of the different actors with other national and international actors, etc. in order to be useful for societies in the developing world facing security challenges. Vivienne Jabri uses other non-postmodernist school theory as Anthony Giddens' structuration theory in order to analyse the relation of the actors and the social structures (Jabri V. 1996:172). This can suggest that postmodernism is a tool for discourse analysis but it requires tools from other disciplines in order to say something meaningful about the security challenges facing societies in the developing world. This highlights the limitations of postmodernism that can not be applied as a single tool for the analysis of the security challenges, in this case to conflicts. Another limitation of postmodernism is that it does not provide solutions for conflict analysis and it would be necessary to apply other theories and approaches to propose solutions. Vivienne Jabri applied Jürgen Habermas' discourse ethics to propose a solution in her discourse analysis (Jabri V. 1996:164). Postmodernism can be seen as an analytical framework that describes and reflects on the discourses in order to aid in the understanding about conflict. This brings to light the limitations of postmodernism in providing solutions. This limitation provides a descriptive or reflective character rather than a normative one. Robert O. Keohane saw this reflective approach as a weakness to consider reflective approaches as theories because they lack of empirical base to be proved as theories (Keohane R.O.1988: 396). Despite these limitations, postmodernism uncovers the importance of discourse in conflict and security for the society in the developing world.

This second section reviews the construction of knowledge in order to facilitate the understanding of postmodernist analysis of security. David Campbell, drawing from Foucault's criticism practice, stated that postmodernism has to be conceived as an attitude rather than a theory. It questions the assumptions and the limits of knowledge in order to understand it better and expand its limits (Campbell D. 1998:215). This questioning of the truth and the knowledge has been used by authors as A. Acharya and B. Buzan to differentiate and to consider postmodernism more radical than social constructivism (Acharya A. et al 2010:10). However, postmodernism and social constructivism focus on culture, discourses, values and identities. This common epistemology can lead to confusion between them. According to David Campbell, constructivism analyses are state centric and see states as individual and agent determined by its constitutive norms, practice and identities in order to explain the international practice of the individual and the states (Campbell D. 1998:215). Moreover, postmodernism moves beyond the constructivism by providing alternative historical narratives to the formation of concepts such as states and identities (Campbell D. 1998:43). Through this alternative narratives, postmodernism is able to question these concepts that social constructivism accepts as given (Campbell D. 1998:43). This genealogy or study of different historical accounts (Smith S. et al 2005:285) can be useful in the understanding of state formation or other concepts in societies where there are many interpretations or historical accounts. In the developing world there are many different identities and postmodernism can facilitate the understanding of power relations among the different discourses and historical narratives. For instance, the Darfur conflict may have different historical interpretations depending on the position of the person or ethnic group that is providing the information. On the one hand, this may complicate the understanding of reality because many contradictory versions may not facilitate the understanding of conflict. On the other hand, by providing attention to the different historical narratives from all the actors, it may reduce the perception of exclusion from certain actors who can not provide enough influence to support their discourses. Under this perspective, postmodernist approach appears to be open and tolerant for listening and dialogue with every actor which are fundamental attitudes for conflict resolution or for coordination among different groups facing security challenges in the development world.

The inclusive character of postmodernism is not only defined by the openness of postmodernism to be receptive to different perspective of the real. Postmodernist discourse analysis studies the processes of the exclusion between on

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an identity and the other. This exclusion is based in the perception of the different group or identity as other, foreigner, dangerous and something external that represented a threat (Jabri V. 1996:172). During this process of exclusion, a discourse is able to legitimise one group and exclude the other. This discourse of exclusion can represent the other as something different and inferior, creating a hierarchy of identities based on difference, exclusion and power relations. On the one hand, discourses of exclusion can create a perception of the other as danger and inhuman that can lead to discrimination, conflict or genocide as the mentioned Rwanda case. On the other hand, discourses can serve as unified element to create solidarity among individuals against one cause, for instance: anti-apartheid campaign. Thus, discourses can also have an honourable role. However, the problem may be on how to decide who would be protected and what to protect from. This paradigm makes postmodernist to question the role of security and protection. In the last two previous examples, there are excluded identities, Tutsi as in the Rwanda case and apartheid regime in the other case, and included identities that need to be defended and protected. Protection and security for the included or internal group could mean insecurity and exclusion for the other or the external group (Bigo D. 2008:105). The question is how to define the group to be protected and the consequences for the unprotected group. Didi Bigo argued that "securitisation makes potentially the totality, the people as a whole, insecure by developing the category of risk, danger and death as normality, but actually targets only margins." (Bigo D. 2008:105). This may suggest that everything can become securitised depending on the categorization of risk and danger. This postmodernist critic can have various interpretations for societies in the developing world facing security challenges. Firstly, all security challenges can become securitised and society can become protected from any challenge. Secondly, no security challenges can be securitised too. Thirdly, security challenges can not be securitised if they are not categorised as risk, for instance the desertification in Sudan. Therefore, societies are not protected from security challenges not categorised as risk. This provides not a clear definition on what to securitises and allow external factors from the challenge, as perception or group interest, to define risk. Under this perspective, postmodernism shares common grounds with Copenhagen school that sees securitisation as the process of how a risk is presented as a danger by a securitizing actor and it triggers exception measures and procedures beyond the normal practice (Buzan et al., 1998: 25).

So, it can be seen that security is socially constructed depending on space, time and power relations among the different discourses from the actors. For postmodernists, the broad limit to securitize things can become a danger for vulnerable societies, for instance to see Nicaragua's government as a national threat for the USA during the Reagan administration. Any concept has the potential to become a source for a securitising discourse depending on how the powerful institutions or societies articulate the concepts. Mark Duffield pointed out that development, based on international dangers concerning societal breakdown, unsustainable population growth and endemic poverty, has become securitised by the international community in the post-cold war period in order to combat terrorism. (Duffield M.2008:3). Thus construction of security is underpinned by poverty and by liberal premises of compassion and social protection. This can be seen as a positive engagement and interest from the international community to support the societies in the developing world. However, it can have other proposes. Duffield stated that under this solidarity, the international community is in charge of the core economy and welfare function of the states (Duffield M.2008:129). This can be interpreted as foreign states intervening in the internal affairs of another country. Duffield proposed that poverty reduction has become part of the discourse to combat terrorism and become a paradox of the liberal security project (Duffield M.2008:129). On the one hand, it can represent a positive aspect to support societies in the developing world to overcome security challenges because it can reduce poverty. Therefore it can reduce the breeding ground for terrorist recruitment. On the other hand, this securitisation process can serve to control and dominate other societies for a different interest than combating poverty. This control and domination by external societies can create disempowerment in the hosting society and so becoming a breeding ground for terrorist. This postmodernist analysis can facilitate societies in the developing world to be aware of the manipulation from external actors and the possibility to become a breeding ground for terrorist activities. This awareness can be the first step to reduce the security challenges in the societies in the developing world but it is not the complete road for a solution. It can be noticed how postmodernism facilitate the analysis by uncovering other narratives. However, postmodernism is not able to provide responses to the highlighted challenges.

This third section examines the concept of biopolitics and its application for security challenges facing by societies in the developing world. In modern times, according to Foucault security has been transformed into two levels, firstly at human level or human as a body and secondly at population level or human as species. To secure these two levels,

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the modern states had to create security mechanisms and institutions to ensure and to regulate life by the development of demography, social security, education and disciplinary institutions (Foucault M. 2004:245). This relation between the human being and the state is what Foucault named biopolitics. Duffield applied biopolitics to differentiate the population between insured and non-insured people depending of the social welfare provided in their state or private insurance (Duffield M.2008:129). This facilitates the classification of the world into a developed and developing world. This classification encourage to external interventionism to support the development of the developing world as previously mentioned with the poverty reduction discourse. A construction of a discourse for someone different can be noticed that requires support for development. This may create certain uncertainty to the societies in the insured world because they constantly would perceive these differences of the non-insured people and would recognize the need for intervention. Vivienne Jabri saw this interventionism as an expansion of the liberal peace in which there is a need to expand biopolitics beyond the traditional sovereign state borders. (Jabri V. 2007:186). This expansion is done under the name of humanity and creates a model of how human life should be (Jabri V. 2007:186). This model of human life assumed certain concepts as universal, for instance human rights, although it excludes other models of human life which do not share these universal principles. According to Jabri, this interventionism is part of a global matrix of war which is able to do pre-empted wars or humanitarian wars under the name of humanity (Jabri V. 2007:186). Jabri sees these developments of global interventionism as a part of the modernity project (Jabri V. 2007:186). Under this view, postmodernism provides a critical analysis that emphasises the predominance of a model of life from the developed world. This model is expanding to developing countries under different justifications such us anti-poverty discourse, development and to protect the humanity. The hope for the society in the developing world would be to be integrated in the so called modernity project with its consequences. However, Ken Booth sees that enlightenment project or modernity has a positive side such as reason, emancipation, liberal humanism, progress, cosmopolitanism..... and postmodernism perceives them as negative, oppressive and imperialists while forgetting the virtue equality as a part of modernity (Booth K. 2007:177,348).

In conclusion, postmodernism provides a reflective and descriptive approach in security studies although limited in its prescriptive and normative character. Firstly, postmodernism highlighted the importance of discourses societies in the developing world facing security challenges. Discourses can cause exclusion or inclusion based on the perception of other groups, individual or states can create to the listener. Discourses would need to be taking into account to overcome security challenges in the developing world. Secondly, postmodernism provides an inclusive approach that advocates for the acceptance of different narratives of the reality. In this case, postmodernism highlights the importance of having an open attitude to listen to different narratives in order to improve the understanding of the security challenges facing societies in the developing world. Thirdly, postmodernism questions the current construction of security and risk. Security can be varied depending on the power relations among the different actors. Societies in the developing world can gain support to overcome security challenges if international community categorised them as risk as a part of security discourses. However, vulnerable societies in the developing world are in a difficult position to question the security discourse that can jeopardise them. This may create more insecurity to vulnerable societies in the developing world. Fourthly, the current approach to security as a development tool to combat poverty can damage more the security in the developing word and create more insecurity. It creates an interventionist attitude that can disempower societies and states in the developing world. Fifthly, this interventionism is pursued in the name of humanity. However, this humanity encloses a particular model of human life that excludes different model of life. An universalisation of a type life can be seen that included universal values. This process of universalisation of the human life can be perceived as an expansion of the project of modernity. On the one hand, the expansion of modernity can help to overcome the security challenge. On the other hand, this expansion can provoke more insecurity for societies with different models of human life. Thus security challenges can facilitate further the development of modernity in societies in the developing world although it has its price.

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