Problematic Positivism: A Post-structural Critique of Power under Neorealism

https://www.e-ir.info/2020/04/30/problematic-positivism-a-post-structural-critique-of-power-under-neorealism/

JOHN WAGGONER ROUSH, APR 30 2020

For most of the history of international relations (IR), research has been dominated by a positivist epistemology. Theorists have sought to take an "objective" approach to their work, believing that one's knowledge is independent of the world, allowing unconditional truths to exist (Marsh 1995, 190). These truths serve as the foundational laws that allow for discernable "facts" to exist (Steinmetz 2005, 33-34). This is an adoption from the field of natural science which is rooted in the dualist view that the world is split between ideational and material spheres. Its application presupposes that social phenomena within IR can be studied in the same manner as natural ones- which is to create hypotheses about the world, then test them against the world as it exists. Neorealism utilizes these concepts by focusing on materiality and quantifiable metrics (Jackson 2008, 132, 135 & 139). Post-structuralism is squarely opposed to positivism. It holds the monist view that there is no such thing as an objective world, only the one perceived based on identity and experience. The only thing we can be certain of is the existence of our body, the "sphere of ownness" (Morin 2007, 165-168). This informs the post-structural understanding that power manifests itself in knowledge and discourse, beyond the materiality of neorealism. Post-structuralism also understands that power is utilized to reinscribe exploitative relationships, beyond the neorealist abstraction of survival. By contrasting these understandings of power, the problematic nature of neorealism is revealed.

Neorealism understands power as tangible- lost, gained, and held exclusively by "units" understood to be unitary state actors (Sorenson 1998, 95). It takes a static approach by ignoring historical/social processes and the origins of actors, and by reducing power to nothing more than warlike, brute force behavior between state units. This is typically reduced even further, to the "capability" or "means" to carry out this behavior (Ashley 1984, 258-259, Brooks 1997, 447). "Capability" is measured through quantifiable metrics, such as number of soldiers and arms, industrial capacity, level of military technology, and possession of natural resources (Taliaferro 2000-2001, 129, 139). This reductionism causes for power to be viewed as something that may, for either purposes of "security" or "domination," be possessed and accumulated/enhanced. Therefore, power is something to be balanced and distributed, a zero-sum commodity that units grapple to possess (Brooks 1997, 460, 463, & 470, Mearsheimer 2001, 30). Through this conceptualization, power is forced into a fixed structure and observed "scientifically" (Ashley 1984, 232). Understanding power as a material commodity possessed by individual units allows neorealist theorists to more readily apply principles from other positivist disciplines, specifically market theory and game theory found in classical economics (Molloy 2006, 120). From a post-structural perspective, this is inaccurate and incomplete.

Power is not something that can be abstracted into some exclusionary simulacrum (Der Derian & Shapiro 1989, 7). It is universal and pervasive. Fundamentally, power is a relationship of force that represses human instincts, individuals, and classes of people and comes into being both concertedly and spontaneously (Foucault 1978, 18, Foucault 2004, 15). Given its relational nature, power only exists through action, changes through time, and is continually produced and exercised through knowledge (Edkins 2005, 4). Power is what produces knowledge, knowledge reinforces power, and they exist through one another (Foucault 1977, 27). Infinite written and spoken discourses manifest from this this nexus of knowledge and power. These discourses convey meanings and value between and about things, and textualize "truth" and control (Der Derian & Shapiro 1989, 17). Moreover, discourses create and assign identities for both individuals and classes. These identities establish dominance or subordinance and open the door to dehumanization and marginalization. This has been notably demonstrated by discourses of

sexuality manifested through religious confession that gave way to some individuals bearing the label of "degenerescence" (Ashley & Walker 1990, 260-261, Foucault 1978, 38-45). Ultimately, everything in existence may be viewed through a lens of discursive power. Even discrete actions, through interpretation and the transfer of action into language through forms of speech (Foucault 1978, 61). Power shapes the "personal history" of individuals and the way they view the world and act. It is not an abstraction- the discourse of discipline, for example, is at work everywhere from the school, to the hospital, to the prison, reinforcing docility and control of the bodies of individuals through regulations, scheduling, clinicality, and other calculated methods individuals take for granted (Foucault 1977, 65 & 136). Fundamentally, this post-structural understanding of power is the opposite of neorealism's static, commodified approach.

Discursive power is prevalent within IR. State institutions, international organizations, and nonstate actors are all encompassed by the dense web of power relations that touches all forms of social interaction (Edkins & Pin-Fat 2005, 5). One example of this is how "Latin America" is conceptualized through the discourses of geography and foreign policy. The use of this label has codified the region as distinct from and subordinate to "North America." The label also reinforces the marginalization of indigenous ethnic groups by Hispanic colonial classes within the region (Der Derian & Shapiro 1989, 7). The post-structural understanding of power is also seen in IR through dissent. If power is a dialectical relationship, it requires resistance to exist. Resistance takes infinite forms, in infinite spaces, from individual acts of dissent to class revolts (Foucault 1978, 96). Resistance is transversal, not locked into "domestic" or "international" spheres, and it is not limited to state units (Bleicker 2000, 1-3, Der Derian & Shapiro 1989, 296-298). Dissent often manifest itself as opposition to state power and shapes the international community in ways that neorealism cannot explain. Examples of this would be the protests that led to the fall of the Berlin wall, or even opposition to "popular culture" by classes within populations that can shape discourse of state institutions (Bleicker 2000, 185 & 206). Though it is not an IR theory *per se,* post-structuralism provides a less abstract, more holistic understanding of power than neorealism.

Beyond their conceptions of how power manifests itself, neorealism and post-structuralism take different positions on power's purpose. One of neorealism's foundational laws is that state units exist within an anarchic environment, wherein there is no higher power to protect them from one another (Taliaferro 2000-2001, 136). Under the other foundational law that states are "rational actors," this situation causes the primary motive of states to be survival, which is understood as the maintenance of "sovereignty" and "territorial integrity" (Mearsheimer 2001, 30-31, Lundborg 2019, 233). Therefore, the purpose of power is parsimoniously understood by neorealists as the means by which states ensure their own existence. It is an understanding rooted in dualism and a belief in universal truth, and the concept of "rational actors" stems from the positivist understanding of objectivity.

Post-structuralism challenges this understanding, first by dispelling the idea that power could be used for rational purposes. Fundamentally, rational actors are an abstraction. It is impossible for individuals, and in this case state units, to maintain a coherent identity, let alone transcend the effects of knowledge-power. They are bound by the power effects of history and language, which makes objective, rational reasoning nonexistent. (Ashley & Walker 1990, 261, Der Derian & Shapiro 1989, 265). Contrary to neorealism, post-structuralism argues that while power can be explicit on the individual level, but more importantly it manifests itself in broad, implicit ways. Power is used not for a notional concept of survival, but to reinscribe inequalities, relationships of force, and control over bodies. This done to socially and economically benefit certain classes and individuals as part of a wider strategy. Some strategies are purposefully orchestrated, others come about unconsciously (Foucault 1978, 95, Foucault 2004, 15-16). Post-structuralism posits that inequalities reinscribed by power can come to be natural and accepted, but their origins and purposes may be discerned by tracing the historical processes that created them through the methods of genealogy and *dispositif* (Bleicker 2000, 25-26). Post-structuralism understands that the purpose of power is not the single-minded survival of rational actors. Purposes are varied, but power structures are created to benefit some groups of people and exploit others.

The post-structural understanding of power's purpose is represented within IR through the discourse of famine. Famines are not simply shortages of food; they are conceived of in a Malthusian manner by state institutions and international organizations. The Malthusian view is that famines are natural and inevitable, caused by population growth outpacing the capacity for the land to produce food. This knowledge of famines is incorrect and ignores the

historic trend of food production increasing with population growth. Famines are often an issue of food distribution, not quantity- whether it is globally or within a state. Historically, states have exported large quantities food while classes within the population starve- as in the case of Ireland during the Potato Famine. Through the discourse of famine, deliberate, genocidal starvation is disingenuously conflated with a spontaneous, or "natural" shortage of food. The victim classes even receive the blame through the implication of poor population management. This creates a power relationship wherein certain classes economically and socially benefit from the starvation of others, as crisis opens the door to looting and raiding, reinforces land control, and commodifies food resources. Above all, it legitimizes the exploitation and destruction of one class by another (Edkins 1996, 549, 558, 559). Clearly in the case of famine, simple survival is not the reason discursive power is exercised. If it were, certain classes would not deliberately weaken the state for their own gain. Neorealism ignores phenomena like famine despite even though they are entrenched within IR, because they do not fit its positivist paradigm and narrow understanding of why power is used.

As discussed, power is immanent in the creation of knowledge, and neorealism is no exception. Neorealism's understanding of how power manifests and its reason for being exercised stem from an aim of explaining occurrences within IR such as war and the existence of alliances (or lack thereof) (Taliaferro 2000-2001, 132). Discursive power is expressed in the creation of knowledge on these occurrences. As a positivist theory, neorealism attempts to take an approach that is based on "scientism," a dedication to scientific methods or processes. It installs a class of "scientists" as the arbiters of truth, regardless of adequacy and accuracy (Steinmetz 2005, 16, 36). This gives neorealism a basis by which it may implicitly and explicitly claim superiority over other theories and sources of knowledge, reinforcing the prioritization of positivism and "science" (and itself). Neorealism thereby sanitizes and marginalizes other, more "local" sources of knowledge and historical contents (Foucault 2004, 7 & 9, Molloy 2006, 19).

Therefore, the neorealist understanding of power in IR is problematic, as it reinforces other discourses of power for the benefit of certain classes in a few ways. First, conceiving of power in a positivist manner, as a commodity controlled by "rational" units, simply universalizes a classical economic mode of thinking, diminishing the importance of the individual and reinscribing inequalities inherent within capitalism (Steinmetz 2005, 36). Second, by implying that the aim of a state is primarily to use brute force and accumulate the means to do so, neorealism reinforces a pre-existing discourse that conflates violence by state institutions with "justice." Neorealism reinscribes the relationship of power and inequality that exists between the "sovereign" and the bodies of individuals which it rules over and normalizes the militarization of state repression/execution (Foucault 1977, 50-52). Finally, by understanding the purpose of power as solely the "survival" of state units, knowledges regarding other power relations are deliberately buried. This understanding of power's purpose naturalizes harmful power relations and erases knowledges of dissent and struggle against them (Foucault 2004, 8-9). This only legitimizes violence and inequalities, drawing attention away from them and subduing critique in the name of positivist science and rationality.

As a positivist theory, neorealism seeks to separate cognition from the material world, to simplify, and to create structures by which phenomena may be measured and explained. In this, however, its understandings of power become counterfactual. It puritanizes knowledge, and inevitably reinforces the interests of elite classes (Steinmetz 2005, 36-37, Guzzini 1993, 446). Post-structuralism is an approach that challenges any manifestation of power. So, it naturally challenges positivism's dominance within IR. It challenges neorealism's material, commodified understanding of power, and its narrow, abstract understanding of power's purpose. Post-structuralism offers an understanding of power as intertwined with knowledge, used to reinscribe inequalities to benefit one class or individual over others- which is both universal and applicable to IR. This understanding can be used to reveal how theories like neorealism are not only wrong, but harmful, fulfilling the post-structural determination to critique.

Bibliography

Ashley, Richard K. "The Poverty of Neorealism." *International Organization* Vol. 38, No. 2 (Spring 1984). 225-286. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706440

Ashley, Richard K. & Walker, R. B. J. "Introduction: Speaking the Language of Exile: Dissident Thought in

International Studies." *International Studies Quarterly* Vol. 34, No. 3, Special Issue: Speaking the Language of Exile: Dissidence in International Studies (September 1990). 259-268. https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/stable/2600569

Behr, Hartmut & Heath, Amelia. "Misreading in IR Theory and Ideology Critique: Morgenthau, Waltz and Neo-Realism." *Review of International Studies* Vol. 35, No. 2 (April 2009). 327-349. https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/stable/20542792

Bleiker, Roland. *Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Brooks, Stephen G. "Dueling Realisms." *International Organization* Vol. 51, No. 3 (Summer, 1997). 445-477. https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/stable/2703611

Der Derian, James & Shapiro, Michael J. *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics.* New York: Lexington Books, 1989.

Edkins, Jenny. "Legality with a Vengeance: Famines and Humanitarian Relief in 'Complex Emergencies.'"*Millenium: Journal of International Studies* Vol. 25 No. 3 (1996). 547-575. https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298960250030501

Edkins, Jenny & Pin-Fat, Veronique. "Through the Wire: Relations of Power and Relations of Violence."*Millenium: Journal of International Studies* Vol. 34 No. 1 (2005). https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298050340010101

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.

Foucault, Michel. *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76* , edited by Mauro Bertani & Alessandro Fontana. London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2004.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

Guzzini, Stefano. "Structural Power: The Limits of Neorealist Power Analysis." *International Organization* Vol. 47, No. 3 (Summer 1993). 443-478. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706983

Jackson, Thaddeus Patrick. "Foregrounding ontology: dualism, monism, and IR theory." *Review of International Studies* Vol. 34, No. 1 (January 2008). 129-153. https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/stable/41307943

Lundborg, Tom. "The ethics of neorealism: Waltz and the time of international life."*European Journal of International Relations* Vol. 25 No. 1 (March 2019). 229-249. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066118760990

Marsh, David. "A Skin Not a Sweater: Epistemology and Ontology in Political Science." In*Theory and Methods in Political Science,* edited by Paul Furlong and Gerry Stoker, 184-212. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1995.

Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.

Molloy, Sean. *The Hidden History of Realism : A Genealogy of Power Politics.* London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006.

Morin, Marie-Eve. "The Self, The Other, and the Many: Derrida on Testimony."*Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* Vol. 40, No. 2 (June 2007). 165-178. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44030236

Sorenson, Georg. "IR Theory After the Cold War." *Review of International Studies* Vol. 24, The Eighty Years' Crisis 1919-1999 (December 1998). 83-100. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20097562

Steinmetz, George. *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological*

Others. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

Taliaferro, Jeffrey W. “Security Seeking Under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited.” *International Security,* Vol. 25, No. 3 (Winter 2000-2001). 128-161. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2626708

Written by: John Waggoner Roush
Written at: University of St Andrews
Written for: Dr. Christopher Peys
Date written: November 2019