On Post-structuralism's Critique of IR

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What are the Consequences of the Post-structural Critique of International Theory?

Post-structuralist theorists pose the question, is the "truth" we know to be unfounded better than not knowing who "we" are? It has been argued that 'being a human being *is* tragic … due to the anxiety which is experienced in the duality of security and insecurity, the freedom … [to be] responsible, [for] the human condition' (Dillon, 1996, p. 138). Without boundaries '"we" cannot say for sure who "we" are because "we" cannot decide what must be the exclusionary boundaries of the remembered inheritance to which "we" … must pay respects' (Ashley & Walker, 1990, p. 387). Therefore, limitations on knowledge satisfy the 'compulsion for security, relieving humans of the dilemmas and challenges they face to discover … what it is to act and live as humans' (Dillon, 1996, p. 14). This imposition of "arbitrary" boundaries fuels post-structuralism's 'guerrilla war' against the system (Wæver, 1996, p. 169). Post-structuralism challenges international theory's 'familiar nodes of subjectivity, objectivity and conduct: they render its once seemingly evident notions of space, time and progress uncertain' (Ashley & Walker, 1990, p. 375). This argument assesses the consequences of post-structuralism's approach to, and critique of, international theory[1], progressing in three stages: the first assesses how post-structuralism undermines the foundations of "reality"; the second assesses the potential for the emancipation of marginalised disciplines; before finally exploring the broader implications of post-structuralism's critique on the constitutive elements of international relations. It will be concluded that the nihilistic approach of post-structuralism can render "knowledge" a redundant concept, and destroy the metaphysical space international theory resides upon. Post-structuralism holds emancipatory value allowing new conceptions of "truth" to face the rigours of an undisciplined reality.

Post-structuralism rejects a positivist approach to international inquiry and denies that foundations for knowledge exist. Thus, the first consequence of post-structuralism's critique results in the foundational claims of theory being questioned. Ashley, in a pivotal essay, refers to theory as a 'nomadic figure … [who] is committed to nothing other than an abstract and mobile will to territorialise' (Ashley, 1996, p. 251). This figure seeks to secure itself on a metaphysical plain as opposed to post-structuralism which 'locates theory at a "nonplace" [depriving] the modern theorist of [a] metaphysical comfort ground' (Ashley, 1989, p. 272). For 40 years, positivism has been the 'gold standard' against which all approaches have been measured, determining what can be studied due to a 'commitment to the natural sciences' (Smith, 1996, p. 17). This has allowed modern discourse a metaphysical plain, an ivory tower, from which to describe and understand "reality" whilst arguably transforming the discipline into an 'ahistorical, universalized dogma' (Cox in George, 1989, p. 274).

Positivism enables the illusion that knowledge has foundations and rests on four 'deeply implicit' assumptions: 'there is a unity between the natural and social sciences; there can be a distinction between facts and values; regularities exist in the social and natural world and finally, empirical validation or falsification is the hallmark of real empirical enquiries' (Smith, 1996, p. 16). Ashley alludes to the positivists' desire for a 'securely bound territory of truth and transparent meaning beyond doubt, [a place that] justifies one's self and one's conduct beyond doubt … and the person of unquestioning faith can be secure' (Ashley, 1996, pp. 252-53). This yearning originates from the need to be able to work within an aesthetically pleasing, parsimonious discipline; rather than having to contend with 'paradoxical, ambiguous and uncertain realities' (Ashley & Walker, 1990, p. 407). Without a disciplined epistemology, a standardised approach to inquiry, there is no possibility to discover regularities and there becomes an abundance of "reality", consequently 'the terms "real" and "unreal" collapse into one' (Weber, 1995, p. 126).

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Post-structuralism's emancipatory approach challenges the parsimony of modern discourse seeking to deconstruct and transcend what it perceives to be the arbitrary foundations for knowledge. Aiming to be 'part of an on-going dialogue and to be non-totalising', post-structuralism represents 'an attitude rather than a set of principles: [it is] a process of questioning and self-questioning … a constant concern for all things that make up our understanding of our world and an appreciation of how inseparable these things are (Eaglesone & Pitt, 2009, p. 310). Rather than accepting that the international system consists of a strict set of ontological assumptions, or as Wæver argues 'mechanical givens', such as the state, gender or class, post-structuralism seeks to promote an 'emphasis on the cultural colouring of international systems and … the general radical interest in [re]thinking the basic categories of the international system' (Wæver, 1996, p. 170). Post-structuralism does not to seek to create theory, rather it 'understands [that] critique is an operation that flushes out assumptions … [and is] an inherently positive exercise' (Campbell, 2007, p. 235). Disagreement with the fact/value distinction prompts 'a radical challenge', claiming our concept of facticity is 'culturally constructed rather than founded in nature' (Gregory, 1989, p. x). Therefore, 'knowledge is not neutral' and [arguably] 'problem-solving positivism needs to be replaced by a critical theory, aware of the political interests it represents' (Smith, 1997, p. 24). Post-structuralism helps 'accentuate a disciplinary crises whose single most pronounced symptom is the very idea of "the discipline"' (Ashley & Walker, 1990, p. 376). Whilst those who work within a positivist framework would disagree with these anti-foundational claims, those who recognise the crisis of culturally determined facticity would argue that 'far from being politically and ethically nihilist and reckless, post-structuralism offers the chance for responsible, radical, and profound ways of thinking' (Eaglesone & Pitt, 2009, p. 311). It is through this rejection of a strict regulation of ontology and epistemology, dictated by positivism, that post-structuralism undermines the foundations upon which modern discourse rests its weary head at night.

Whilst modern discourse's reliance on arbitrary foundations of knowledge could demonstrate the severe anxiety of the discipline to secure a metaphysical comfort ground, the means by which it marginalises competing claims shifts this anxiety to an aggressive will to monopolise. Therefore, the second consequence of post-structuralism's critique is that it demonstrates the marginalisation practices of modern discourse, and thus has the potential to aid the emancipation of the discipline. 'Defining common sense is the ultimate act of political power' (Smith, 1996, p. 13) and post-structuralism views the current means in which modern discourse exerts power over international theory, with the aim of maintaining a sovereign voice, similar to the way in which the Wizard retains control of Oz. In short, 'a modern discourse must … silence history and difference, moving them to the margins of its discourse, lest they undo the effect of presence in which modern discourse would establish its hegemonic centre (Ashley, 1989, p. 263)'.

The first means through which modern discourse marginalises the discipline is through its worship of positivism. This "gold standard" of positivism has marginalised approaches that deny that the social world functions in the same mechanical way as the natural world. The need for a metaphysical comfort ground denies the ability to accept the ambiguity of existence. Critiquing Keohane, Weber demonstrates the perception that post-positivism 'cannot be made to serve the laws of science or the goals of the discipline' (1994, p. 346). Without secure ontological assumptions, borne from a strict regulation of epistemology, post-positivist approaches are removed from the metaphysical plain fortified by modern discourse. Keohane argues that such an approach will 'not be fruitful … to conduct a debate at the purely theoretical level … it will take us away from our subject matter' (Keohane in Walker, 1993, pp. 99-100).

Secondly, a 'blindness to historicity' (Weber, 1995, p. 2) generates perceived coherence and reinforces arbitrary boundaries on knowledge. Foucault's assessment of history leads him to argue that 'history constitutes a favourable environment … it offers a background, which establishes it and provides it with fixed ground and … determines the cultural area … in which knowledge can be recognised as having validity' (Foucault, 2006, p. 405). This evaluation suggests that the implicit things we "know" are questionable, and by looking to our own history we can free ourselves from what 'we silently think, and so enable [us] to think differently' (Foucault in Escobar, 1992, p. 22). Modern discourse is therefore a 'conceit' as knowledge is believed to be the product of the accumulation of history: 'the completion of time, where all diversity and displacement can be finally and fully reconciled, comprehended in a pure synchrony and represented as a closed totality' (Ashley, 1989, p. 264). Consequently, students of international theory will assume that they are taught an accumulation of knowledge, rather than being installed into a framework of theory that has marginalised and silenced mortal dangers. For example, Ashley, in an attack upon neo-realism, argues that

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for the 'purposes of theory, the state must be treated as an unproblematic unity: an entity whose existence … can be treated as given' (1984, p. 238). Thus, for the nomadic figure to secure himself in anarchy he must assume the existence of a sovereign voice; yet, this is not necessarily a coherent voice as over time it has changed from God to the state (Gregory, 1989, p. 5). This necessity for a sovereign is demonstrated through some approaches that 'acknowledging ambiguity … defer questions of meaning in favour of pressing on to investigate "serious" questions of international relations, all the while referring to the sovereign' (Weber, 1995, p. 2).

A sovereign is maintained through 'adopting [a] certain blindness' to paradoxes within works that have defined the discipline, these unsettling paradoxes can be marginalised through a practice or memorialising (Ashley & Walker, 1990, p. 388). Similar to the way faith can tame ambiguity in order to secure history, theory memorialises texts, such as the work of Hobbes, Machiavelli and Marx. Memorialising 'adopts a religious attitude and is conducted in a register of desire, responding to a crisis of representation wherein the problem of sovereignty emerges, it aspires to make a text, discourse of domain of practice function as a foundational reality' (Ashley & Walker, 1990, p. 399). The foundations of knowledge that the texts build upon deny any ambiguity or inconsistences encountered, 'paradox, ambiguity, and indeterminacy are not allowed to disturb the ostensibly central logic of resolution that redeems the sovereign presence posited at the start' (Ashley & Walker, 1990, p. 384). To oppose this 'wilful amnesia' (Ashley & Walker, 1990, p. 386), post-structuralism exposes the assumptions of these classical texts through a dialogue, rather than monologue, reading and addresses encounters with paradoxes, ambiguity and contradiction.

Finally, building on absent foundations of knowledge, and the ways in which modern discourse can marginalise texts through an active ignorance of unsettling paradoxes, modern discourse can monopolise its position through the perpetuation of inside/outside relationships. To unveil the workings or 'regimes of truth' there must be an understanding that theory relies on an appeal to dichotomous relationships (Campbell, 2007, p. 216). The dichotomies utilised by modern discourses place competing terms in hierarchical opposition, 'where [one] term is privileged as a higher reality, a regulative ideal, and the [other] term is understood only in a derivative and negative way, as a failure to live up to this ideal and as something that endangers this ideal' (Ashley, 1988, p. 230). Ashley's 'heroic practice' explains the triumph of the state when it is situated as a binary opposite to anarchy. The state becomes the 'privileged higher reality' and thus seen as a hero, a saviour from the perils of anarchy. The state becomes common sense once the practices of marginalisation and memorialising are used in conjunction in order to secure its existence in "reality".

The disciplinary practice of creating boundaries and dichotomous relationships is practiced in order to reaffirm the reality of the inside and 'constitutive of our modern understanding of political space' (Walker, 1993, p. 174). For example, a critical approach to geopolitics demonstrates how the world is disciplined into the 'first world and third world, North and South, state and state' (Ó Tuathail, 1994, p. 231). Geopolitics has been used as 'the spatial expression of Western ethnocentrism, those Enlightenment discourses that spatialize the world according to notions of the modern and the traditional' (Ó Tuathail, 1994, p. 229). The definition of a domestic society is created in reflection to the outside dangers it is protected from. We know who we are by knowing what we are not. It is argued that 'the foundational limits that discipline "our" reflections on "international politics" involves little more than an endless parlaying of representation of danger' (Ashley, 1989, p. 311). It is through post-structuralism's recognition and unveiling of disciplinary practices that modern discourse's dominance over the metaphysical plain of knowledge loses legitimacy. Once the faith in the timelessness of Realism, the enlightened thinking of Liberalism and the class struggle of Marxism has been broken, it is only with an active practice of ignorance that the world will function in the same mechanical, ultimately disciplined manner.

The final and concluding element of this essay seeks to explore how post-structuralism may enable the conflicting relationships that constitute reality to desist. If post-structuralism's critique is taken seriously then life has 'already been betrayed by knowledge' (Levinas in Dillon, 1996, p. 17). "Reality", due to the necessity for a sovereign voice/nomadic figure to territorialise a metaphysical plain, means there must exist a spatial awareness, which requires boundaries, and boundaries are constituted by conflicting dichotomous relationships; in order to justify the definition of "us", "us" cannot be "them". Doty argues the 'question of representation has historically been excluded from the academic study of international relations', and this separation 'has shaped the horizons of the discipline' (Doty, 1996, p. 4); just as Said, in his seminal work, describes how 'Orientalism has less to do with the

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Orient than it does with "our" world' (Said, 1979, p. 12). Further examples of the current definitive relationships of contemporary international relations include: us/them, North/South, East/West and West/Islam. The world's conflicting associations are the very constituents of reality. These relationships have been perpetuated by, and suffered the marginalising practices of, modern discourse. The more serious implications of this are apparent when the history of colonialism is assessed and in the contemporary engagements with an irredeemable Islam. The idea of '"race" functioned as a point around which identities were fixed, "knowledge" was produced, and subjects were positions vis-à-vis one another' (Doty, 1996, p. 42), and thus the process of "knowing" allowed the classification of civilised and uncivilised during the colonial period. Whilst, hopefully, these classifications have been seen to be arbitrary, the process in which they were crafted and maintained is no different to the ways in which modern discourse exerts it authority over spatial, temporal and intellectual realms of theory.

Finally, as a concluding thought, what possibilities exist for "peace" in the future when conflict defines "us"? It has been demonstrated that an unbounded knowledge leads to the human condition being tragic, due to the anxiety of freedom. Therefore, theory seeks to secure itself, it monopolises "knowledge" and seeks to fortify the ground it claims as sovereign, through structuring knowledge and alienating opponents through marginalisation practices. As knowledge cannot be an uncontested referent object, it can only inform "us" of what we are, by arbitrarily defining what we are not. Structure needs a spatial presence and boundaries and as a consequence there will always be an "other"; there is a perverted love affair with what we are not in order to understand what "we" are. Whilst there is a dependence on an "other" to define us, there can never be unity, a lack of conflict or the ability to transcend the constant monopolising of power/knowledge. Therefore, recognising post-structuralism's approach could potentially emancipate the constitutive and conflicting necessity of negative identity from the international system. Post-structuralism provokes the somewhat terrifying idea that rather than maintaining the rules we know, even if they result in conflict, we can step out onto the great plain that the nomadic figure of theory roams, which is boundless, and thus there is the potential to face the unknown of the wilderness.

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[1] Throughout this essay the term 'modern discourses' will be used to refer to the contemporary and dominant theories of IR; that of: Realism, Liberalism and Marxism. These three approaches compromise the inter-paradigm debate and share a rationalist research program, and seek 'more formula like assertions that can be reduced to simple analytical to tests and theories' (Wæver, 1996, p. 163). In terms of ontology, their underlying assumptions on the make-up of IR are 'essentially identical' (Smith, 1997, p. 17) and thus the term suffices.

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Date written: November 2012