

Introducing Poststructuralism in International Relations Theory

Written by Aishling Mc Morrow

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Poststructuralism encourages a way of looking at the world that challenges what comes to be accepted as ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’. Poststructuralists always call into question how certain accepted ‘facts’ and ‘beliefs’ actually work to reinforce the dominance and power of particular actors within international relations. Poststructuralism doubts the possibility of attaining universal laws or truths as there is no world that exists independently of our own interpretations. This viewpoint is underscored by Foucault’s (1984, 127) assertion that ‘we must not imagine the world turns towards us a legible face which we would only have to decipher’. For this reason, poststructuralists encourage researchers to be sceptical of universal narratives that attempt to offer an objective worldview, as these assumptions are heavily influenced by pre-existing assumptions of what is true – and usually underlined by the views of those in power. This renders poststructuralism openly critical of any theory that claims to be able to identify objective fact – as truth and knowledge are subjective entities that are *produced* rather than *discovered*. Therefore, by design, poststructuralism conflicts with the bulk of other IR theories as it finds them unable (or unwilling) to fully account for the true diversity of international relations.

The basics of poststructuralism

Poststructuralists argue that ‘knowledge’ comes to be accepted as such due to the power and prominence of certain actors in society known as ‘elites’, who then impose it upon others. Elites take on a range of forms and occupy many different roles in contemporary society. For instance, they include government ministers who decide policy focus and direction for a state, business leaders who leverage vast financial resources to shape market direction, and media outlets that decide how a person is portrayed while reporting a story. Additionally, elites are often also categorised as ‘experts’ within society, giving them the authority to further reinforce the viewpoints that serve their best interests to a wide audience. Jenny Edkins (2006) uses the example of famines to show that when elite actors refer to famine as a natural disaster, they are removing the event from its political context. Therefore, the ways that famines occur as a result of elites taking particular forms of political action, through processes of exploitation or inaction due to profits on increased food prices, are lost when they are presented as unavoidable natural disasters.

Although great emphasis and focus is placed upon the authority of the elite actors to decide what we count as valid knowledge and assumptions within society, poststructuralism asserts that the way in which this power is achieved is through the manipulation of discourse. Discourses facilitate the process by which certain information comes to be accepted as unquestionable truth. Discourses which augment the power of elites are called *dominant* or *official* discourses by poststructuralists. The strength of dominant discourses lies in their ability to shut out other options or opinions to the extent that thinking outside the realms set by the discourse is seen as irrational.

An example of this can be found in the security versus liberty debate. The wish to increase security levels across society – in response to crime, irregular migration and terrorist threats – has been presented as a sliding scale

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whereby if a state wishes to be secure then the public must endure a reduction in personal freedoms. Personal freedoms – such as the freedom of expression and freedom of assembly – have been placed as the limit against which security exists. In this discursive construct, then, people are presented with the choice between a state that respects civil liberties but is left potentially insecure or a state that must curb personal freedoms in order to be secure and protected. In practice, the dominant discourse of securing the state often works to silence any concerns about enhanced state power. An elite programme to restrict civil liberties can be justified to a society conditioned by the ‘expert’ repetition of this discourse by appealing to the objective logic it asserts and discounting all other interpretations. Therefore, the move to achieve increased levels of security *without* the infringement upon personal or civil liberties is excluded from the argument, as the two are constantly being positioned in direct opposition to each other.

For poststructuralists, language is one of the most crucial elements for the creation and perpetuation of a dominant discourse. Through language, certain actors, concepts and events are placed in hierarchical pairs, named binary oppositions, whereby one element of the set is favoured over the other in order to create or perpetuate meaning. The power relation that is embedded within this relationship (for example, good versus evil or developed versus undeveloped) serves to reinforce the preferred meaning within the discursive construct. International Relations as a discipline is full of these oppositions and they are used by elites to both create favourable meaning out of certain events and to allow for this meaning to be easily absorbed and accepted by the wider public. One of the most common binary oppositions is to establish different groups or countries in terms of ‘them’ versus ‘us’.

If we look to the aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001 (commonly known as 9/11) we can see these categories of differentiation and their influence begin to manifest themselves. President George W. Bush described Iran, Iraq and North Korea as an ‘axis of evil’ – making these countries the ‘them’ that were rhetorically and politically positioned as international pariahs in contrast to the innocent ‘us’ of the United States and its allies. Hence, this binary opposition enabled Bush to claim that the United States was opposite to all that this trio represented and would be justified in taking various actions during a global campaign against states that were judged to sponsor, or harbour, terrorists.

If we look to the work of one of the leading scholars of poststructuralism, Michel Foucault, then the concepts of elites, discourses and the power of language and binary oppositions all tie together to create what he labels a ‘regime of truth’. This model applies to the ruling discourse that operates unquestioned within society, masquerading as the truth or fact. A regime of truth, then, is constituted by the dominant discourse, elite actors and the language that is used to create and sustain meaning and truth that serves the interest of the favoured actors.

The importance of poststructuralism is to highlight existing regimes of truth and show that conventional ways of thinking and analysis in international relations are unable to point out how certain other possibilities are excluded by these discourses from the very start. Butler (2003) builds upon this idea of discourses excluding other possibilities by proposing that certain lives, in certain conflicts or terrorist atrocities, are deemed as more ‘grievable’ than others. Butler argues that thousands of people are lost to conflict in countries such as Palestine and Afghanistan, often at the hands of Western powers, and yet these people are not mourned or memorialised or even heard of within Western reports of war.

This hierarchy of grief can also be seen in the outpouring of sympathy for victims of terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015 and Nice in July 2016. Yet, similar attacks in Beirut and Nigeria in November 2015 and Baghdad in July 2016 (to name but a few) went largely unnoticed and were silenced within regimes of truth that mourned for, or favoured, the ‘innocent’ Western victim.

Poststructuralism and media representations of terrorists

The media is a prime example of a site where discourses within regimes of truth are (re)produced and can be identified. How we receive information and the way that news events are presented to a society shapes how we conceptualise and react to political events. As such, if we want to observe how people have come to conceive and frame both terrorism and terrorists, the poststructuralist can analyse media accounts in order to analyse the

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discursive construction of these political actors and associated terrorist events.

As the defining global terrorist attack of the twenty-first century, the attacks of 11 September 2001 on the United States can be used to convey how dominant discourses, instigated by governmental elites, were perpetuated and reinforced by the media.

In newspaper reports – specifically, in the week after the attacks – the terrorists were presented as evil and irrational, their stated political motivations were effaced and instead terrorists were repeatedly spoken of as crazed and apolitical. The terrorists were plagued by ‘inexplicable neurosis’ and driven by ‘ethnic, superstitious and tribal madresses’ (Toynbee 2001). Additionally, these terrorists were set apart as different from more traditional forms of terrorism that the world had previously witnessed through the highlighting of the lethality and deadliness of mass murdering transnational terrorism – a move which heightened the emotions of fear and anxiety further.

To underscore this link to death and destruction, the media narrative also consistently linked both the acts and actors of 9/11 to images and metaphors of pestilence and disease. In contrast to this, was the cultivation of the idea of ‘American innocence’ (Boswell 2001) that was ‘vulnerable to hate’ (Boyd 2001), coupled with the persistent repetition and reminder of the suffering of the victims of 9/11 and the heroism of the first responders. Interspersed with this, the widespread international outcry to the attacks simultaneously worked to further emphasise the immorality and inhumanity of these actors. Themes of patriotism and civility were deployed within the media to further distance the cohesive ‘us’ from the generic barbarian terrorist. The reactions of the public that gathered together to pray, support each other, volunteer and eventually join the military juxtaposed radically with the destructive actions of the terrorists. Moreover, the emotions that the narratives of these actions evoked related back to feelings of love, empathy and altruism that the media utilised to engender further cohesion in society against the ‘other’ of the terrorist.

The importance of the recognition of this discourse is *not* to attempt to present these political actors – the terrorists – in a better light, but to recognise how the consistent and universal portrayal of them as evil and irrational made certain reactions and foreign policy actions more amenable and immediately cut off other methods of responding to these terrorist attacks. From this, poststructuralism critically questions what purpose did the construction, by both the media and the government, of a dominant discourse that posited the terrorists and the society that they belonged to as evil and barbaric serve? How did the positing of an unbridgeable chasm between the civilised society and the primeval terrorist, within this regime of truth, favour elite agendas? One answer has been the identification of how this ‘good versus evil’ construct prepared and almost rallied the American public for war. It certainly prevented the chance of dealing with these attacks through diplomacy, as the overarching discourse stated that these terrorists merely wanted to destroy the world before them. While some may support the wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) that followed these attacks, the poststructuralist contribution deconstructs how this militaristic and aggressive response to 9/11 was legitimised by the discursive construction of the terrorists, the emotions that were manipulated and the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’ that was fashioned.

The pervasion of this discourse also served to conflate the motivations and acts of these terrorists with the construction of a wider Muslim and Arab society. With the simplistic interpretation of the historical relations between the ‘West’ and ‘East’ that was encouraged in this discursive construction, the regime of truth played upon and amplified the notion of the Muslim or Arab world as backward and primordial. Within the regime of truth of the War on Terror, then, this emotive discourse was extended to every Muslim, every Arab, and, eventually, every non-Westerner.

With the passage of time, we are also able to trace the gradual disruption to and destabilising of this regime of truth. As the United States was drawn further into destructive and protracted conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the public opinion that had supported intervention began to wane. Over time, the discursive construction of terrorists by the media was not strong enough to override the concurrent media accounts of large numbers of casualties resulting from the intervention. Along with these fatalities, as the media began to report on the abuses that were carried out, the regime of truth that had been centred on the foreign policy directives of the Bush presidency started to falter. Thus, the official discourse regarding terrorism and intervention was changing and this shift can be identified by a

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shift to more clandestine forms of intervention in the Middle East from 2009 onwards – watermarked by the presidency of Barack Obama. The increased use of special forces and drone strikes allowed Obama to continue to exert influence over the region without overtly declaring war – while also distancing his administration from the military intervention that defined that of his predecessor.

The official discourse across an event, although powerful, never fully accounts for the reading of the entire situation. While the presentation of terrorists as irrational and evil has found solid ground and the dominant perceptions of terrorism and terrorists are of an illogical and apolitical act and actor, there always will be deviation from this conceptualisation. As such, the official discourse as crafted by elites never fully accounts for or subsumes the whole of a society. For example, despite the warmongering in the wake of 9/11, there were large-scale anti-war protests by members of the public across many nations. This messy entanglement of the everyday and the elite shows that a plethora of discourses can coexist and craft the view of international relations that we are offered. From this we must recognise that elite and everyday discourses co-exist and, although one assumes a dominant position, there are still many other competing discourses at play that shape international relations and have the potential to contribute to understandings commonly seen as ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’.

Conclusion

The impact of poststructuralism within IR theory comes from its ability to not only identify and uncover power relations that dictate political events but also make space for alternative discourses to emerge that can also affect the course of events. By examining elite actors, we can see how commonly accepted facts about the political system are not ‘natural’ but, instead, constructed in order to favour a dominant discourse. Furthermore, by tracing the rise and fall of regimes of truth as they take on new forms and favour new actors, poststructuralism shows how discourses can change over time and be destabilised. Most importantly, poststructuralism allows you to become care- fully attuned to – and interrogate – the many ways that power is exercised.

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