

How do Postmodernists Analyse International Relations?

Written by Justin Pickard

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Attempts to define the strand of postmodern theory in the field of contemporary international relations are often overwhelmed by the challenge of having 'to make intelligible some of the different problematique, focii, and theoretical strategies' [1]. As opposed to the analyses of traditional theoretical strands, which attempt to represent their approach as a coherent and unified theory, any analysis of the postmodern must be prepared to navigate what Lapid describes as a 'confusing array of only remotely related philosophical articulations,'[2] which shelter beneath the 'rather loosely patched-up umbrella'[3] of postmodernity. While there may be recursive images and characteristics, isolating 'a clear definition of postmodernism that will meet with general agreement is' – according to Devetak – 'precisely what is not possible.'[4] Attempts to formulate a totalizing analysis of that which constitutes the postmodern are rendered impossible by postmodernity's rejection of the very metanarratives that would be integral to such an analysis. Other than 'an incredulity towards metanarratives'[5], and a preoccupation with 'deconstructing and dis-trusting any account of human life that claims to have direct access to 'the truth"[6], there is no real unifying thread underlying postmodern thought. As such, postmodern international theory lacks the navel-gazing and ongoing self-analysis which appears to be firmly embedded in the dominant discourses of other, more state-centric traditions.

Walker claims that postmodern international theory can be decoupled from its corresponding literary, philosophical, and visual manifestations. He believes that, unlike other disciplines, international relations is 'explicitly concerned with the politics of boundaries ... [seeking] to explain and offer advice about the security and transgression of borders between established forms of order and community inside and the realm of either danger (insecurity, war) or a more universalistically conceived humanity (peace, world politics) outside.'⁷ Der Derian agrees that international relations as a discipline is particularly conducive to postmodern approaches. It seems almost as though the international stage is a lens for those phenomena that best reveal the shortcomings of those theories the socio-political based in overarching metanarratives. In Der Derian's opinion, 'the complexity, ambivalence, and indeterminacy of human relations, magnified, mediated, and estranged in the international arena, make it all the more evident why a single ... theory cannot explain the workings of international relations.'[8]

With no monolith of postmodern orthodoxy dominating the landscape, the means of pursuing post-modern analysis are incredibly varied; the result of a widespread appropriation of ideas and approaches from other disciplines. However, this diverse body of methodology is held together, to an extent, by the idea of deconstruction. In the context of international relations, Constantinou explains how postmodernists 'seek to deconstruct the traditional international relations framework by uncovering the assumptions and artificial construction of political identities', resisting the tacit deference to 'those who accredit the sovereign presences of these identities.'[9]

Der Derian believes that deconstruction is one of the only ways one can successfully analyse the international in the face of what he has heralded as a 'crisis of modernity'; a situation in which objective reality is displaced by textuality, modes of production and supplanted by modes of information, representation gives way to simulation, imperialism takes a back seat to the Empire of Signs; the legitimacy of tradition suffers on several counts, the unifying belief in progress fragments, and conventional wisdom becomes one of many competing rituals of power used to discipline (international) society. [10]

From his vantage point, the world has changed; transforming the nature of international relations. Certainly, areas of liminality, frontiers, and marginal zones are nothing particularly new, but 'the acceleration and agitation of social

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activity' has caused 'a proliferation of transgressions of institutional boundaries'[11], which undermine the fundamental tenets of the traditional, state-centric international theories, leaving a theoretical vacuum in their wake.

The postmodern analysis of international relations is dominated by studies of traditionally marginalised sites, which focus on ideas of intangibility, disorder, ungovernability, and terror. Such foci provide a helpful vantage point to examine 'the paradoxes involved in any attempt to assert a sovereign voice in a world where ... marginal zones ... [are expanding] relative to the supposedly homogeneous territories that institutional boundaries would demarcate and contain.'[12]

In order to represent this focus on marginalised sites, we can examine two existing texts that deal with postmodern international theory; examples of how the postmodern approach has informed studies dissimilar in all but their emphasis on the value of scepticism and deconstruction. The first, Constantinou's 'Diplomatic Representation, or, Who framed the Ambassadors?', is an attempt to represent a relatively famous painting – Holbein's 'The Ambassadors' – as a window into the production / reproduction of international discourse. As the contemporary onlooker is unable to know the truth of Holbein's intention, the only way we read this painting is as a symbolic framework upon which we are able to project our own discourses and ideological biases. The specifics of this, or any painting, are ultimately unimportant, as the textual elements are embedded as much in the ongoing debates and academic analysis as they are in the work itself. Constantinou comments on how he discovered that the title given to the work, 'The Ambassadors', was afforded by the gallery during the framing process, and attempts to use this as a metaphor for the way in which hegemonic discourses 'frame' reality, assigning importance and marginalizing the liminal.[13]

As a second example, we can turn to Der Derian's 'S/N: International Theory, Balkanization and the New World Order', in which he approaches an analysis of post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe in a manner more usually associated with travel writing, ethnography, or Gonzo journalism. Locating himself firmly in a textual stream-of-consciousness detailing his physical journey, he claims that this approach to producing an academic text served his aim of devaluing 'high structural analyses built upon noncontested concepts and parsimonious models by flooding the marketplace of international theory with imported, post-structural narrations.'[14]

A further example of postmodern practice can be found in Detevek's commentary on conceptual oppositions. Detevek comments on the extent to which those state-centric theories of international relations are underpinned by a discourse which normalizes the oppositions of domestic / international, and sovereignty / anarchy. He believes that such oppositions are fundamentally synthetic, masking the fact that 'each term always already depends on the other', that 'the prized term only gains its privilege by disavowing its dependence on the subordinate', and that 'neither term is pure, self-same, complete in itself, or totally closed off from the other, though as much is feigned.'[15] In this example, anarchy is represented as undesirable, and sovereignty is associated with the domestic state apparatus. This claim – which Ashley refers to as the 'heroic practice'[16] – posits that in order to avoid the ill-defined horrors of an anarchical international system, one must surrender power to the now normalized nation-state.

This so-called 'heroic practice' is scrutinized in more detail in Ashley's 'Untying the Sovereign State: A Double Reading of the Anarchy Problematique', a concrete example of the postmodern method of double reading. In double reading, the analyst first examines the text in an attempt to assess internal consistency and coherence. In Ashley's case, he approaches the discourse of 'the anarchy problematique' with the intent of understanding how the discourse works; 'how it gains significance ... [and] how it comes to be recognised as a powerful representation of a predicament so compelling and so self-evident that it seems to command attention.'[17]

Having undertaken a thorough analysis of the discourse on its own terms, he then hopes to observe that which the discourse has obscured or omitted in an attempt to maintain coherence and, from that position, can question 'how, in the course of its development, [said] discourse has exposed its own rhetorical strategies and undermined the very foundations of the perspective it asserts'[18].

The majority of postmodern approaches to international relations question or reject the validity of the 'heroic practice' which problematizes the anarchy of the international system, whilst normalising the state monopoly on violence as

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part of the prevailing discourse on domestic sovereignty. On a purely analytical level, 'postmodernism is less concerned with what ... sovereignty [is], than how it is spatially and temporarily produced and how it is circulated. How is a certain configuration of space and power instituted? And with what consequences?'[19] Ultimately, this discourse of sovereignty has another, less tangible role; 'as part of the 'concepts and knowledge claims that dominate the discipline', such conceptions and discourses are highly significant, not least for the role they play in feeding that totalizing process which 'binds together knowledge and power'[20] within the field of international relations.

Devetak is one of many to ask whether, 'in view of multiculturalism, ethnic diversity and interpenetration, minority and indigenous rights, diasporic peoples, environmental degradation, migration and the general movement of peoples, globalization, interdependence and so on', the sovereign state is – after all – truly an 'effective form of political organisation'[21]. For the bodies of traditional international thought, this question would have been not only unanswerable (as it arguably still is when Devetak asks it), but – perhaps more significantly – would have been unthinkable. For although the sovereign nation-state may have hardened into a self-evident truth over time, postmodernism is free to examine 'how state sovereignty was forged into an identity, and whether the cracks in this political concept are rendering it anachronistic or dysfunctional.'[22]

In this freedom, Walker recognises the dominant strength of this postmodern approach to international theory; that which renders it separate from the ingrained intellectual baggage which has mired existing theories in a swamp of discourse and competing metanarratives. Postmodernists have the freedom to question those assumptions which have traditionally underpinned conceptions of the international. He believes that scholars of international relations with a postmodern leaning have the freedom to the ways in which 'theories of international relations ... have been constituted on the basis of historically specific and increasingly contentious claims about what it means to establish, defend or transgress borders, whether territorial or intellectual.'[23] In order to determine the specific nature of that which postmodern analyses have added to our understanding of the international, however, we are faced with two possibilities; either the world itself has changed, or postmodern theory has simply thrown light on the international state of affairs, revealing things that previously went unseen. The former bears a distinct similarity to Der Derian's 'crisis of modernity', but – on the other hand – there seems little to suggest that the power/knowledge nexus is necessarily anything new. Ultimately, any attempt to reach a conclusion on this matter is probably little more than an exercise in futility. Both the idea of postmodernity and that of an enduring power/knowledge nexus risks assuming the role of a totalizing metanarrative, which would undermine the whole theoretical approach.

In conclusion, there are multiple means and methodologies by which postmodern analyses of the international are pursued, of which double reading is but one example. Generally, the majority of these approaches tend to represent themselves as either a manifestation of, or in some way linked to, the basic tenets and aims of the deconstructive method. This equates to the denormalization of those embedded theoretical elements which have been around for so long that they are now taken for granted, the interrogation of marginalised or liminal texts and sites, and a mistrustful questioning of those who claim to possess any kind of totalizing international 'truth'. In this, postmodernism appears to have been comparatively successful, and Devetak comes to the fairly concrete conclusion that the postmodern contribution to international relations has, thus far, been threefold: '(1) the problematization of state sovereignty ... (2) the problematization of the sovereignty / anarchy opposition ... and (3) theorizing the historical constitution of sovereign states'[24]. The postmodernist approach has shed light on that which was previously disregarded or suppressed, spurning embedded, normalised and unseen power relations, and arguably risking marginalisation in the process. But such marginalisation no longer really matters, as critical postmodern voices are free from many of the constraints of the state-centric mainstream. Plus, I cannot help but suspect that, not only are these embedded power relations not fully conscious in and of themselves, but that they lack the resources and means to effectively combat something as dynamic, heterodox, and decentralised as the postmodern 'movement' currently appears to be.

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How do Postmodernists Analyse International Relations?

Written by Justin Pickard

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[17] Ibid. p. 228.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Devetak, R. 1996. p. 196.

[20] Ibid. p. 183.

[21] Ibid. p. 187

[22] Ibid.

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[24] Devetak, R. 1996. p. 206.

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