Is Poststructuralism a Useful IR Theory? What About Its Relationship to Historical Materialism?

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MICHAEL MERLINGEN, MAY 8 2013

The questions I was asked to address in this paper are whether poststructuralism makes a useful IR theory, and if there is anything interesting to say about the relationship it has, or does not have, with Marxist or historical materialist IR. The second part of the question is not as strange as it looks at first sight, not least because many key poststructuralists are/were post-Marxists, that is, their intellectual journey to poststructuralism included a stop-over in the realm of historical materialism. In any case, both parts of the assignment sound innocent enough. Actually, they are not. They raise tough issues that have the power to get people very excited. The reason for this has to do with our metaphysics or, as the political theorist William Connolly (2004) aptly put it, with our existential faiths as scholars.

By this provocative term he simply means our images of how the world works and how science relates to the world. What Connolly wants to say is that just like their theistic beliefs will influence the day-to-day decisions of religious people, the existential faiths of scholars will influence their theoretical orientations and even seemingly technical decisions related to research design and method choice. I will discuss some of these tricky metaphysical questions in relation to poststructuralism in section 1. In sections 2 and 3, respectively, I will talk about what you can, and cannot do with poststructuralist IR. I conclude by exploring points of friction and rapprochement between poststructuralism and historical materialism and what each side might gain from putting animosity aside and from engaging in a genuine conversation aimed at the flexible appropriation of analytical tools fashioned by the other camp.

1. What's in a Word? The Meaning of 'Post' and of 'Structuralism'

Poststructuralism is an intellectual movement that grew out of and away from structuralism in the second half of the 1960s. It gained increasing popularity inside and outside academia in the wake of the student and worker revolts against established systems (political, economic, cultural), which shook the Western world in 1968. Pioneers such as Richard Ashley, Jim George, Michael Shapiro and Rob Walker introduced poststructuralism into IR in the 1980s. In the wake of the end of the Cold War, which many students of world politics saw as raising question marks about the explanatory power of rationalist-materialist IR theories, and in the wake of the subsequent cultural turn in the discipline, poststructuralist IR evolved from a dissident movement suspiciously eyed by colleagues into a honourable IR perspective comfortably existing at the margins of the mainstream.

A good starting point for a paper addressing the question as to whether poststructuralism is useful, and for what, is to clarify what it is we are talking about when we speak about poststructuralism. We can deduce from the term that its proponents distance themselves from certain aspects of structuralism without, however, fully abandoning it: their existential faith is both 'post' and 'structuralist'. Let's unpack this statement. Structuralism is a broad term which designates a range of different approaches in the human sciences. What they have in common is the conviction that the most productive entry point into examining society is the nature of the relations among the parts making up the investigated social system. This differs from individualism, which assumes that society does not exist as a phenomenon with either constitutive or causal powers, and that, therefore, all social analysis must start from the properties (the beliefs, interests, etc.) of individuals. In contrast, structuralism posits that any social element (persons, states, mythical gods, etc.) exists only in particularly patterned, or structured relations linking them to other elements in a system, and that one can only understand each element by analysing it in the context of its insertion

into a structure of social relations. Different structural approaches elaborate the basic argument in different ways, ranging from Durkheimian sociology to Wallersteinian world systems analysis and Waltzian international systems theory, though the structuralist credentials of the latter can be questioned.

The structuralism in poststructuralism is a linguistic approach derived from the work of the 19th century linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Adapted to the examination of the production and circulation of signs – images, information, knowledges, rituals, etc., this structuralism became 'the next big thing' in France in the 1950s, with its declining influence lasting into the 1970s. French structuralism, whose influence quickly spread beyond the country, was characterised by a number of commitments. First, structuralists rejected what Michel Foucault called the figure of man, the assumption that human beings are autonomous, self-governing subjects. Instead of examining the conscious actions and intentions of people, they highlighted the role of symbolic systems, say the psyche or discourse, which govern individual actions and intentions, in most cases without people being aware of how they are influenced.

Second, structuralists explored these systems as sets of related elements, which find their place/meaning through differentiation from each other. For instance, supposed masculine qualities are established by juxtaposing them to supposed feminine qualities. A corollary was the assumption that there is a radical difference between the signifier, say a written word, and the signified – the phenomenon it designates. Against empiricists and positivists, structuralists assumed that the meaning of a phenomenon was not derived from its intrinsic nature or essence but was the effect of an arbitrary imposition of a particular meaning on it, an imposition which was shaped by a grammar or rules internal to a symbolic system.

Third, structuralists focused on synchronic analysis, which suspends questions of causality and focuses on conditions of change. Synchronic analysis asks, if you tweak one element in a system what happens, at the same time, to the other elements making up the system.[1] Synchronic analysis is not causal analysis because the 'tweaking' does not temporally precede the effect but is constitutive of it; hence, the diachronic dimension of causal analysis is disregarded. Fourth, structuralists argued that the linguistic model could be extended to other social systems. For instance, the godfather of French structuralism Claude Lévi-Strauss said that the economic system could be analysed in terms of the 'communication of goods and services', that is, as a symbolic system (Lévi-Strauss, 1974: 296). Fifth, structuralists believed that their systems could be modelled as systems of general laws. Assuming that systems are stable, they wanted to establish a context-transcending and exact science of signs.

Having clarified what the structuralism is against which poststructuralists rebelled, we now need to identify what precisely in the structuralist doctrine poststructuralists object to and what they preserve in their own approaches. What is important to keep in mind is that just as there were many structuralisms, so there are many poststructuralisms.

To begin with, poststructuralists retain the structuralist perspective on the constructedness of individuals and the underlying relational philosophy. They remain opposed to the essentialist individualism typical of liberalism and sceptical of its political corollaries such as international human rights policies, which are based on, and propagate the vision of what David Campbell (2010: 224) calls 'universal person'. Second, poststructuralists remain faithful to structuralism in their rejection of any transcendental signified that could ground or warrant knowledge and meaning claims. They are post-realists, where realism refers to the belief that a world external to cognition and discourse is the baseline against which the truth of our sentences about the world must be measured. As Foucault (1981: 67) put the post-realist credo, we 'must not imagine that the world turns towards us a legible face which we would have only to decipher; the world is not the accomplice of our knowledge'. Third, poststructuralists follow structuralists in claiming that the production and circulation of signs constitute a key region of the social world, and that fields of action such as economics and politics can be analysed as semiotic configurations. Poststructuralists, however, disagree on whether to retain an analytical role in their approach for an extra-discursive reality, which interacts with discourse. Foucault retained such a commitment. Many if not most contemporary poststructuralists, including in IR, go further and argue that semiosis is coextensive with the world, that is, they admit only the world of signs and meaning into their analyses. If these are the propositions that make poststructuralists 'structuralists', what makes them 'post'?

The central commitment that makes poststructuralists 'post' is their rejection of the scientific aspirations of structuralism. Following Friedrich Nietzsche, poststructuralists mistrust all systematisers and systematisations. They argue that the will to know, including the desire to formulate context-transcending truths and to model social reality in terms of regularities, rules and laws is a disguised will to power aimed at waging war against the unruliness of human life and the interpretative possibilities of the world. Poststructuralists argue that knowledge is inextricably bound up with power, where power is understood not as the possession of material resources but as representational power. It unfolds in and through texts and discursive practices by means of which particular conceptualisations of the world are circulated and by which these interpretations are transformed into conceptual prisons, which stop the free play of signification and fix meaning in the name of a 'truthmaker', say, God or extra-discursive reality. Second, many poststructuralists have returned to diachronic analysis, not in the form of causal modelling but in the form of genealogical analysis, which examines the contingent power struggles through which (arbitrary) meanings are imposed on the world around us. Third, many poststructuralists, notably in IR, have rediscovered the role of agency in social life, notably in relation to the inevitability of making ethical decisions in the absence of any firm ethical foundations.

2. What You Can Do With Poststructuralist IR

Whether you find poststructuralist IR useful, or more generally, whether you should bother learning more about it (more than is required for your coursework), depends on your cognitive interests. What is it you want your theoretical tools to help you with, what are the problems you want to solve? Social theories are not good or useful in general, but only in relation to certain interests, purposes or standards. This implies that what for some will be a strength of poststructuralist IR, will be a weakness for others. For you this means that you cannot get around making a decision of what you want your theory to be able to do, what your standards of a good IR theory are. Of course, you may try to avoid such value-laden decisions, insisting that you select your theoretical tools on purely technical, or rational-instrumental grounds having to do with how well they are suited to tackle your research question or research problem. This is fine as far as it goes. A basic claim of poststructuralism, is that what counts as an interesting or even admissible research question or problem is shaped by all kinds of potentially contestable cognitive and extra-cognitive factors, ranging from your metaphysical beliefs about how the world works to the influences on research agendas coming from the political system, say, via funding decisions. True, not all social scientists subscribe to this view of how scholarly research agendas and programmes are formulated. But this only underlines that the selection of research questions, and the selection of theories to answer them, is a contestable process that requires of you to make value-rational decisions, even if your choice is to reject value-laden choices.

Most importantly, poststructuralist IR empowers you to do critique, as opposed to seemingly disinterested and 'value-free' descriptive or explanatory analyses.[2] You are enabled to interrogate and disturb the self-evidences of current scholarly and mass-mediatised representations of whatever world political phenomenon you investigate. You are encouraged to reveal how the contingent construction of the meaning of international life engenders 'subjugation and social injustices that are uncritically and continually reproduced as if they were inevitable' (Sterling-Folker, 2006: 159). In short, as a poststructuralist you are expected to de-naturalise or de-familiarise that which other theories and common sense take to be self-evidently true and morally desirable. Second, you are empowered to study world politics from the bottom up, focusing on the local, inconspicuous, undramatic, quotidian and banal practices and strategies through which we ontologise, fix or naturalise the world. Alongside issues seemingly unrelated to world politics like the role of management textbooks or of the municipal treatment of the homeless in constituting and giving contents to global order. Such a research focus can be quite liberating in a field that often takes its research clues from the high politics of war and peace, high-level diplomacy, transgovernmental networks and so forth. Third, you are empowered to treat whatever you explore as sui generis, rather than as a member of a class about which you are asked to generalise. You are not belittled for doing mere descriptions but encouraged to delve into the holistic complexity of phenomena and events, revealing their contingent origins and the malleability and contestability of their semantic structures. In short, as a poststructuralist you are expected to foreground ideographic research that documents particularity and singularity rather than nomographic research that seeks to generalise. Finally, you are encouraged to adopt an ethical research attitude, which seeks to cultivate the abundance of a world that is always in the process of becoming, never finished as in Fukuyama's dystopian vision of the end of history. As a poststructuralist you are encouraged to carry out research, say, into alter-globalisation, which opens up new thinking

spaces in which many different local and unruly practices and identities can flourish.

The typical targets of poststructuralist critical interrogations in the human sciences are power, identity, the will to truth and all kinds of marginalisations/exclusions of rogue subjectivities and aberrant practices. In IR, poststructuralists have translated this generic research agenda into more specific interrogations of, among other things, state sovereignty; anarchy; biopower (a power that operates in the name of expertise rather than politics and targets populations by distinguishing between safe life to be fostered and dangerous life to be contained or eliminated); a codified, universal and de-politicising international ethics (as institutionalised in human rights regimes); the will to improve underdeveloped or post-conflict societies, which is disclosed as a will to power; and global governmentalities, that is, political discourses and discursive technologies such as competitive reports and conditionality policies through which states and populations are measured and ranked by international institutions and networks, deviance is defined and outliers are disciplined and normalised.

To do this sort of poststructuralist critical work, you may use genealogy, that is, historical studies that aim at disclosing and analysing the accidents, contingent constructions, power struggles, exclusions, brutalities and unexpected influences that make the present, including its seemingly desirable features such as humanitarian aid, what it is. You may engage in discourse analysis, which looks at the discursive rules of formation, discursive strategies and tropes through which the meaning of people and things is constituted and at the principles of exclusion, which shape what is sayable, thinkable and reasonable within a discourse and what is not. Or you may deconstruct oppositional and hierarchically organised dualities, say, rogue states versus states that are good international citizens, dualities which determine how we make sense of the world and which create conditions of possibility for some policies and conditions of near impossibility for others.

Based on what I just said, you may conclude poststructuralism is a powerful tool for reflecting about, questioning and escaping the conceptual jails imposed by good or common sense as defined by popular culture or by best practice as defined by dominant academic schools (think of Robert Keohane's distinction, in his presidential address to the International Studies Association, between rationalistic and reflective approaches and his admonition to reflectivists to get their act together). You may find poststructuralism's denaturalising mode of analysis, its 'dismantling [of] all our certainties' (Donzelot, 2008: 115) intellectually liberating, enabling you to look at the heavily policed discursive practices, which you resist, as an ethnologist would look at the strange cosmologies of pre-modern tribes. You may find it inspiring to realise that because the manner people and things are arranged in world politics is ultimately without any secure foundation, world politics can be reconstructed or re-arranged to make it less oppressive, more solidaristic or whatever.

If I had to sketch the kind of person who is likely to make a good poststructuralist researcher, I would say the artsy, creative type who is able to invent 'surprising stories' (Kendall and Wickham, 1999: 22), novel framings or conceptualisations. Richard Rorty (1995: 12-13) called this person 'poet', by which he meant 'someone like Galileo, Yeats, or Hegel … who makes things new'. A very different personality type is likely to excel in doing mainstream positivist social science. The good positivist researcher needs to be, or learn to be logical, methodological, rigorous, precise and, in general, a numbers person – an accountant!

3. What You Cannot Do With Poststructuralist IR

You will not be surprised to hear that this question, too, is not simply a technical question. There are obviously very many things, technically an infinite number of them, which you cannot do with poststructuralism. For instance, you are unlikely to find it to be an effective rainmaking technique (at least to my knowledge). Probably no one in academia will consider this a problem. What this slightly frivolous example suggests is that any meaningful discussion of the things one cannot do with poststructuralist IR requires as a baseline an understanding of what a decent IR theory ought to be able to do. And such an understanding is inevitably also about values.

As we have seen in the previous section, for poststructuralists the main strength of their approach is its usefulness as a tool of criticism. Card-carrying members of the anti-poststructuralism wing of academia will reframe this apparent strength into a fatal limitation that disqualifies poststructuralism as an academic enterprise, whose core business is

the quest for truth. Interpretative critique is what feuilleton sections in Sunday newspapers do, not what academics ought to be doing. Anti-poststructuralism was a powerful movement in the last few decades of the last century and even in the beginning of the new millennium (think of the American culture wars). However, nowadays the more tolerant non-poststructuralist camp is clearly dominant; it relates to poststructuralism with an attitude of benign neglect. Scholars belonging to this camp see poststructuralist IR as a niche approach, which may be able to offer some interesting food for thought but which, grosso modo, remains irrelevant to the core business of the discipline. Here I want to discuss the question of what one cannot do with poststructuralist IR from a more nuanced position. If you are like me, you will see considerable value in poststructuralist IR while at the same time feeling a bit underwhelmed by the tools it gives you. Let's unpack this ambiguity.

While admiring the power of good poststructuralist research, you may not be fully convinced by its typical plots and not fully satisfied with how their stories typically end. To begin with, you may ask, if things are contingent, if the world is in flux, howcome many important things actually do not change, but persist. You may be baffled by, and want to explain, the powerful elements of continuity, solidity and uniformity in world politics. For instance, you may be surprised that Western capitalist countries, including second-tier powers such as France and Britain, have eagerly returned to the practice of earlier centuries to engage in never-ending military interventions in countries of the Global South. You may also be surprised by the elements of continuity, which over the centuries have characterised the role of many NGOs and the rhetorical tropes they employ to create the thinking space for such humanitarian or modernising military interventions; a continuity which was only briefly interrupted during the time of the decolonisation movement and the power struggle between East and West, when Western military interventions were widely seen as illegitimate. Once you get to this point in your queries, poststructuralist explanations about the fundamental differences in meaning context between then and now or the sedimentation of discursive practices, which may temporarily and unpredictably get stuck or fixed before they dissolve again in the never-ending process of the becoming or unfolding of the world may no longer sound so convincing.

You may ask, but is there not something else going on? In your quest to understand the strange continuities in how we think and speak about and organise international life you may want to be able to look beneath the surface of seemingly discontinuous discourses and mentalities and dig into the roots of what the Foucault-inspired Marxist Bob Jessop calls the improbable structured coherence of the social world. You may have a hunch that, contra the poststructuralist existential faith, the world really is made up of conceptually specifiable structures of relatively stable social relations, which generate their own causal powers and which exist, metaphorically speaking, beneath the visible world of discourses, practices, institutions and events. These structures, while depending for their existence on the meaningful action of people, generate their causal effects independently of the (intersubjective) stories people tell each other to make sense of the world around them. You may start to think that materialists have a point when they speak about the terribly material nature of social relations, that is, about the materialisation of the social in structures whose functioning and effects cannot be understood by looking at the world as a meaningful text because all social action has unacknowledged, non-narrativised or wrongly narrativised conditions and consequences. And your hunch may extend to the belief that to understand this underworld of social materiality, you need theoretical tools that empower you to (re)construct its structures and their causal powers. This is for instance what Karl Marx (1999: 557) thought. He argued that 'all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided'. Coming back to our example, you may want to connect the old and new humanitarian imperialism to a logic or structure of capitalist economic relations that constrains private firms, and the states which depend on the economic growth they generate, to constantly find new investment and profit opportunities around the globe. You may find that humanitarian imperialism (old and new) is less about the will to improve (the white man's burden in previous centuries and the duty to protect the lives of strangers today), and more about opening up new markets, about transforming crony capitalisms privileging local elite networks into open, flexible and transparent markets open to international investors, and about re-allocating property rights to, and among international investors in what the Marxist David Harvey calls accumulation by dispossession. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose![3]

Furthermore, you may not be fully satisfied with how poststructuralist stories typically end. You may like the idea of doing critique as a kind of textual insurrection aimed at contributing to opening up new thinking spaces in which the world can be brought under many different optional descriptions. But deep down you may also wish for something more hopeful, for what in critical theorising traditionally has been called utopia, that is, representations, carefully and

systematically elaborated, of an alternative, desirable ordering of (international) life and of possible ways and strategies to realise it. Poststructuralist scholarship shies away from utopian projects, giving them a bad name as something inherently totalitarian; a repression of the heterogeneity and abundance of the world. This attitude is best described by Jean-François Lyotard (1984: xxiv), who famously defined poststructuralism as 'incredulity toward metanarratives' such as emancipation. Without denying the dangers that lurk in utopia, which have for instance been amply demonstrated by Stalinism, you may wish to hold on to the politico-epistemic Enlightenment bet that saw and sees in scholarship humankind's best hope for using reason to better society as a whole. While sensitised by poststructuralist insights into the multiplicity of reason and the dangers of the will to know and improve, you may think that Foucault only got it half right when he said that 'critique does not have to be the premise of a deduction which concludes: this then is what needs to be done. … It doesn't have to lay down the law for the law. It isn't a stage in a programming. It is a challenge directed to what is' (Foucault, 1991: 13).

4. Rebel Alliance? What Poststructuralists and Marxists Might Gain From Talking to Each Other

Poststructuralists and historical materialists, or Marxists, are critical theorists, rebels of established foundations and arrangements (within and outside academia). Yet they typically do not like each other and look down at each other's approaches. In the concluding section, I want to do something that many people consider impossible or at least undesirable. I want to argue that both poststructuralists and historical materialists would benefit from seeking points of contacts and rapprochement. As intimated above, there are some big differences between poststructuralism and historical materialism. Three differences are key to understanding the dividing lines between the two camps. First, historical materialism adheres to philosophical realism, that is, it believes that social reality exists independently of our accounts of it. Historical materialists thus subscribe to the classical definition of truth, according to which a statement is true or false in virtue of the state of the world. Poststructuralism rejects philosophical realism in favour of nominalism. Words are just that: words. They do not capture, reflect, mirror or correspond to an external reality. Language is self-referential or as Derrida put it, discourse lacks any transcendental signified. Second, historical materialism believes that social reality is configured and causally shaped by not readily visible or intelligible social structures that operate behind the back of people. An example of such a structure is the 'underlying logic of capitalist accumulation and its crisis tendencies' (Harvey, 1992: 189). Poststructuralism believes that there are no 'ready-made' objects such as social structures. Rather, social objects are constituted in and through discourse, which implies that they do not have any essence, nature or logic independently of the meaning system in which they emerge. Finally, historical materialism holds fast to the utopia of a holistic re-ordering of (international) life, a re-ordering which for most Marxists is animated by what the French neo-Marxist Alain Badiou calls the communist hypothesis – the 'pure Idea of equality'. Poststructuralism is sceptical of grand narratives of this sort, and thinks that emancipation can never lead humankind into a world free of power and oppression and that, therefore, the best strategy is to pursue local and issue-specific struggles to limit concrete, clearly delineated manifestations of oppression, exploitation and discrimination.

These are big differences. But there are also important contact points between the two approaches. Here I mention two crucial ones: genealogy and the double-sided nature of power. Both poststructuralism and historical materialism have a genealogical orientation. Both want to show 'that that which seems natural and eternal is historical and impermanent' (Choat, 2010: 112). In many of his political essays and even in certain parts of his masterpiece – Capital – Marx displayed a genealogical sensitivity that shows how contestable his reputation as an economic determinist is. His politico-economic histories pay great attention to the complexity and unpredictability of the examined cases and to the heterogeneous elements that come together in unique historical situations to produce unexpected or surprising outcomes. Also, Marx shares with the godfather of genealogy, Nietzsche, the suspicion that 'blood and horror lies at the basis of all "good things" ', for instance when he observes that capital comes into the world, 'dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt' (Marx, 1990).

Second, both poststructuralism and historical materialism conceptualise power as being at the same time repressive and productive, that is, producing subjectivities and modes of life. For instance, Foucault explored the productivity of power in relation to the development of capitalism, arguing that a form of power that both disciplines and fosters / optimises the capacities of individuals was crucial for enabling capitalists to proceed with 'the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production' (Foucault, 1998: 141). Marx not only acknowledged the role of 'barracks-like

discipline' in factories as crucial for producing pliant and productive workers but took the idea further by arguing that capitalist production itself is not simply about the deployment of social power to produce goods and services but also about the capacity of social power to produce the subjectivities and forms of life of workers (Marx, 1993: 92). This theme has been picked up and elaborated by, among others, neo-Marxists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who use the term biopolitical production to refer to the emergence of new subjectivities in post-Fordist capitalism, forms of subjectivity which they see embodied in an immaterial proletariat, whose members value autonomy, cooperation, creativity, for whom work is co-extensive with life and who oppose traditional forms of political representation. A key aspect of their argument is the global dimension of these changes in capitalism and subjectivity, which have given rise to a de-centred and networked capitalist empire and new forms of popular resistance against it. More traditionally, Gramscian IR, too, pays attention to the productivity of power relations in production, in the state and in world politics (Cox, 1981; Bieler and Morton, 2001).

What we can take away from the discussion so far is that the analytical relations between poststructuralism and historical materialism are a mixture of conceptual compatibilities and incompatibilities. This excludes any easy synthesis. But it also provides the basis for a genuine conversation between the two camps, in which each seeks to identify opportunities for the flexible appropriation of analytical themes and tools fashioned by the other camp, while staying clear of epistemological and ontological controversies.

What might each camp gain from such a conversation? Here I can offer only a few suggestions. Quite a few poststructuralist IR scholars are text-centric. Without denying the importance of semiotic analyses for understanding world politics, one may wonder if the post-realist ethnologist Bruno Latour does not have a point when he criticises such text-centric approaches for their 'mystical view of the powers provided by semiotic material' (Walters, 2002: 89). A conversation with historical materialists might make some poststructuralists see the value in a thicker contextualisation of their text or discursive analyses, say, provoking them to pay greater attention to Foucault's admonition that discursive practices are not purely and simply ways of producing discourse. They are 'embodied in technical processes, in institutions …' (Foucault, 1988: 200). The connection between Foucault's scepticism about text- or discourse-centric analyses and historical materialism is not as far-fetched as it might look. Foucault maintained an 'uninterrupted dialogue' with Marx throughout his career (Fontana and Bertani, 2003: 277). Marx was a ghostly presence in Foucault's work. Today's poststructuralists could do worse than to follow into Foucault's footsteps and to allow Marx to haunt their work.

As to historical materialists, they might benefit from appropriating certain tools from the semiotic toolbox of poststructuralists to further develop Gramscian IR into what Jessop calls materialist-discursive approaches. Such an analytical reinforcement of historical materialism would empower scholars to address the debilitating empirical anomalies they face. At the core of these anomalies is the great success with which neoliberal capitalism imposes a particular ideological form, or repertoire of subjectivities on human life, a repertoire which historical materialists have traditionally regarded as alienating. Neoliberal citizens are a life form who relate to themselves as entrepreneurs of themselves animated by the desire to maximise their value in the marketplace and as acquisitive consumers who purchase commodities, which industry advertises by infusing them with personal meanings and which neoliberal citizens use to publicly express their personality. Historical materialists need better tools to come to grips with the production and apparent attractiveness of such identities, which are far removed from traditional working class identities. Only by developing a wider and deeper understanding of the power and effects of everyday subjectivities and representational practices can historical materialists address their empirical anomalies. One such anomaly is the surprising stability of capitalist democracies in the face of severe and prolonged economic crises. Another big empirical puzzle is related to the issue of imperialism, which has traditionally been a core concern of Marxist IR. For centuries anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism was a mainstay of world politics. Apparently no longer. Today many among the popular classes and elites in the Global South perceive Western (military) intervention and power as the bringer of hope rather than as the imposer of coercive limits on social self-determination.

Poststructuralists, not least by opening up their own work to the spectre of Marx, can help sensitise historical materialists to the semiotic dimension of life and encourage them to appropriate tools from the poststructuralist toolbox. Again, this is not as far-fetched as it may sound. Jessop is an excellent example of a historical materialist who has learned to broaden his analytical approach by engaging seriously with Foucault. In the end, what is at stake

in the conversation between poststructuralists and historical materialists is the quality of our critique of world politics and our ability to change it. In light of these stakes it seems a good idea to give conversation a try.

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Michael Merlingen *teaches IR theory and EU foreign and security policy at the Central European University, Budapest. He is particularly interested in exploring points of rapprochement between Foucauldian and historical-materialist IR, and he wants to contribute to the elaboration of more powerful materialist-discursive approaches to world politics. His most recent book is European Security and Defense Policy: What It Is, How It Works, Why It Matters (Lynne Rienner, 2012).*

[1] As Foucault put it, 'synchronic analysis asks the question: in order for a change to be able to be obtained, what are the other changes that must also be present in the field of contemporaneity? (Foucault, cited in Davidson, 1997: 11).

[2] As poststructuralist approaches have entered the margins of the mainstream, the critical ethos which characterised the work of people like Foucault, Deleuze or Lyotard and the original poststructuralist dissident movement in IR has partly been displaced by what William Walters (2012) calls applicationism – the uncritical use of ready-made poststructuralist tools in standardised research designs.

[3] 'the more things change, the more they stay the same'

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About the author:

Michael Merlingen lectures in IR at Central European University in Budapest. He is interested in the dis/continuities between historical materialism and Foucault's work.