

# How does Poststructuralist Theorizing Challenge Understandings of Power?

Written by Liam A Simmonds

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LIAM A SIMMONDS, DEC 28 2015

### How do Poststructuralist Streams of Theorizing Challenge Mainstream Understandings of 'Power' in International Politics?

Poststructuralism (PS) is a deviation from traditional mainstream understandings of International Relations in many ways and its formulation of power is no exception (Jones, 1998). The understandings that PS poses to mainstream theorising is more than a simple evolution of knowledge, but a fundamental challenge to the foundations that concepts, power included, rest upon (Cole, 2012). While firstly grounded in the abstract and metaphysical (Cole, 2012), this attack on the explicit and implicit assumptions that mainstream positivist thinking is rooted in provides thinkers of International Relations an important critical lens to view and reflect on the perceived world, media and cultural texts, and even our own academic discipline (Smith, 1996, p. 11).

For the structure of this essay, I shall divide it as follows: After clarifying and defining key terms, the first section shall demonstrate the critiques that PS posits to the mainstream by exhibiting a broadly Foucauldian-informed framework of power<sup>(1)</sup> by describing a PS understanding of its location, role and properties. The second section will apply this understanding beyond the abstract; applying it to various examples across world politics, including aid donation, terrorism and borders. Lastly, to conclude this essay, I shall summarise and reiterate the key positions taken throughout whilst additionally offering avenues for further research on the topic.

Given the complexity of the topic, for the sake of lucidity, clarifications are needed. Firstly, what I refer to as the 'mainstream' of IR will comprise of a crude amalgamation of the school of realism, including the classic, neo, neoclassic, offensive and defensive variants, and neoliberal institutionalism. Next a brief overview of what the mainstream understanding of power is: Rooted in positivist understandings of the world (Smith, 1996), the mainstream theorists focus on power-maximising sovereign states whose behaviour is constrained by perpetual structural anarchy, power is something to be possessed by actors and can be quantified in terms of military or economic strength (Neal, 2009, p. 162). In relation to the Barnett and Duvall's taxonomy of power (2005), the mainstream is limited to the compulsory and institutional formulations of power.

Finally, I want to stress that this essay is not attempting to simply say that the PS understanding of power is objectively better than its mainstream counterpart. I wish to emphasise, much as Digeser does, that the PS formulation(s) of power is best used in conjunction with other conceptions of power to best elucidate relations of power within world politics (1992, p. 991). That is not to say that PS does not outright challenge and reject many assumptions that the mainstream schools hold regarding power, it certainly does, but that in itself is not a reason to reject the possibility for complimentary academic overlap; "after all, they capture the different ways in which social relations shape and limit actors' ability to determine their fates." (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 67)

### Understanding Poststructural Conception(s) of Power

Prior to beginning, I wish to provide a brief notice for readers. As this essay draws heavily on Foucault, it is of significant importance, I feel, that some important caveats of his work are brought forward to help clarify some

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aspects of this essay and help demonstrate my appreciation for the nuances that such as a complex approach, poststructuralism, and such a complex writer, Foucault, requires. Foucault never sought to craft from his work a problem-solving theory in the same sense that conventional theories of International Relations have been (Smart, 2003, p. 208). This is deeply tied to Foucault's scope of study and methodological practices, from madness and mental institutions to discipline and prisons, Foucault formulated these conceptions of power that I talk about, disciplinary and biopower, in specific socio-historical contexts. From this I forewarn the reader for the sake of good academic practice that it is important to be aware of how Foucault's work is appropriated and placed into theoretical containers for the purpose of understanding the world of world politics.

PS's conception(s) of power directly challenges the epistemological underpinnings of the mainstream. Ashley and Walker assert that PS has brought uncertainty to previously evident notions of "subjectivity, objectivity and conduct." (1990, p. 375) The largest issue introduced was through Foucault's work exposing the instinct link between power and knowledge, which directly attacked the positivist foundations that mainstream theories rested their political methodology upon by asserting that the "suspension of values, interests and power relations in the pursuit of objective knowledge" is simply not possible (Devetak, 2005, p. 162). Rather than wishing for knowledge to be detached and isolated, as mainstream theorists had desired, for Foucauldian PS the entwinement of knowledge to power is essential in searching for the varying sources of power (Grocock, 2008, p. 4), for it is "exercised by virtue of the mere fact of things being known and people seen " (Foucault, 1980, p. 154). The localities through which the PS conception of power travel through are crucial in the formulation and presentation of the subjective 'real' (Steffy & Grimes, 1992), which are key in the construction of knowledge within world politics, which rely heavily on the representation of identities of states and populations within political discourse. Indeed, knowledge that claims to be neutral or nestles itself as a part of self-evident assumptions should be questioned and examined for those very reasons (Knights, 1992).

Another fundamental challenge to the mainstream's conception of power are the properties of power itself. As mentioned before, the mainstream views power as a metaphysical commodity, something that can be possessed or imbued within actors or institutions (Grocock, 2008, p. 3). PS disagree, with Foucault suggesting something quite the opposite: "Power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared, something one holds on to or allows to slip away." (Foucault, 1978, p. 94) PS asserts a greater complexity in the spatiality of power, arguing it proliferates amongst a multiplicity of sites (Walker, 1991, pp. 445-446); a pluralisation of "forms, techniques and locations of power" (Neal, 2009, p. 164). In the PS understanding, Foucault paints a picture detailing, I think, the best written explanation for where power originates, resides and multiplies. In direct antithesis to mainstream theorising, Foucault dismisses the notion of a headquarters, or governing caste or group that presides over the application of power, but rather directs attention to explicit exercise of power at confined, lower levels. It is here where "tactics" become inscribed which then attract and connect with one another which end in the formation of a comprehensive system of power: "the logic is perfectly clear...and yet it is often the case that no one is there to have invented them, and few who can be said to have formulated them." (Foucault, 1978, p. 95) Relations of power, Foucault notes, are the "immediate effects of...divisions, inequalities and disequilibriums" that occur in social relationships and interactions (1978, p. 94). It is here Foucault differentiates from structural conceptions of power, by importantly emphasising the idea that these power relations do not merely accompany discrepancies in other relationships, but "play a directly productive role" (Foucault, 1978, p. 94) in objectifying and subjectivating actors. (Neal, 2009, p. 163).

This leads on to the biggest 'practical' implication of the PS understanding of power: Power as productive (Foucault, 1977, p. 194). In his article translating Foucault's understanding of power into the 'faces of power' debate, Digeser epitomises Foucault's conception of power as being concerned with the construction of subjects (1992, p. 980). In highlighting the omnipresence of the PS understanding of power, what Digeser calls 'power4'<sup>[2]</sup>, he notes another differentiation between PS and mainstream theorising; whereas within the mainstream and radical (Marxist) conceptions of power he notes the possibility for human relations not mediated by power, something not possible with 'power4', which serves as a permanent basis for all social practises (Digeser, 1992, pp. 980-981).

A core role in productive power is that it acts as the means by which deep values and norms are constructed. All "our political, economic, legal, and religious practices are planted in a social context governed by various rules and discourses forged by relations of power." (Digeser, 1992, p. 982) These productive discourses formulate "social

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process and systems of knowledge through which meaning is produced, fixed, lived, experienced and transformed.” (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 55) The manifestation in which productive power permeates and constitutes individuals and the social body is through these discourses (Foucault, 1980, p. 93). Indeed, it is through these discourses were regulation of what constitutes truth, rationality and legitimacy takes place (Mole, 2007, p. 16). It is only through discourse that real objects have meaning at all in the social world (Howarth, 2000). The construction of what is constituted as ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’, such as the rational man, or the pious citizen, can transform such concepts into templates for the formation of subjects (Digeser, 1992, p. 987). By constructing what defines “the natural, the normal” you also define the unnatural, the abnormal (Hayward, 2000, p. 35), with the objective of the exercise, implicit or otherwise, of productive power is to normalise subjects into fitting with pre-constructed norms and behaviours, who then go on to perpetuate these forms of power through their own daily behaviour (Neal, 2009, p. 163). It is through these discursive processes that social identities are attached to actors and objects and have meaning inscribed into them, thus demonstrating the ability of the PS conception of power to not only target, but change and create (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 56). The influence of this is not to be understated; through the productive discourse of identity formulation the “rights, responsibilities and social capacities” of all individuals, groups, populations and institutions are defined beyond binary hierarchical relationships (Barnett & Duvall, 2005, p. 56). Hayward even go as far to say that productive power is the root of human subjectivity and social relations (Howarth, 2000, p. 6). While Foucault, and PS more generally, is extremely hesitant to offer anything resembling meta-theory or explanation for human behaviour (Jones, 1998), Hayward’s hyperbole certainly exemplifies the fresh, illuminating insight to power that PS has offered to the discipline.

The last point is another large departure from the mainstream understanding of power, and possibly the most significant for academics. Contrary to the mainstream theories of power, PS deviates in the sense that the PS conception of power is not attempting to be a grand, universal explanatory theory of power. Indeed, PS as a theoretical approach is not seeking to offer a unified theory of international relations like the mainstream theories are, where their concepts of power directly tie-in to how states and actors behave universally. Whereas PS is a great deal more modular and rooted in specific historical contexts, the mainstream strive for universality and ahistoricity. These differences are crucial to acknowledge when using and discussing the respective schools of thought and are representative of the largest, most fundamental theoretical challenges that PS posits to the mainstream within International Relations.

## Applying Poststructural Conception(s) of Power to World Politics

I start this section by expanding on biopower before applying it and productive power more generally to elements of world politics. Following on from the concept of disciplinary power, which looked at the normalisation of productive unitary subjects (Neal, 2009, p. 164), biopower, or biopolitics, is the power of control, correction, administration and regulation of populations (Van Munster, 2004, p. 145). Velibeyoglu notes that is a direct departure from the thinking of mainstream International Relations theory, which had denied the plausibility of such a productive, life-giving concept for being used to understand power (1999). Biopower thus can be seen as an example of PS pushing out of the academic confines set by positivism (Smith, 1996, pp. 11-12) and exploring beyond the traditionally defined realm of academic possibility.

Biopower is the power of “making live and letting die.” (Foucault, 2003, p. 247) Neal notes the allocation or withholding of funds from states in aid donation is a practise in making live or letting die through the decision of prioritising recipients of aid (2009, p. 165). Expanding on the idea of aid donation, through the critical aesthetic turn in International Relations, it is not just states who can exercise biopower in this respect, but also the populations of wealthy nations. Everyday television adverts to large promotional events such as *Comic Relief* specifically emphasise the difference *you* can make. Through the multitude of promotional videos featuring individuals, usually women or children, starving, naked or poorly clothed, the biopower is flows and becomes visible in the next few actions of those who watch these videos; do *you* decide to donate, and make a small child in some far-off village live? Or do you choose to do nothing, and wait for the new Mr Bean sketch, thus letting die? Even if you choose to do the latter, and your intention is not to let die, it is yet what happens anyway, demonstrating an example of unintentionality of biopower and productive power more broadly. Due to PS accounts of power being always present, they is exercised, for the most part, “without intentionality, objective interests, or a repressive character” (Digeser,

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1992, p. 284), in contrast to the theorising of mainstream conceptions where power is given a de facto oppressive visage. Representations of persons and groups within media texts and aesthetic products act as a pictorial or literary manifestation of dominant political discourses. Our detachment to these cases that are depicted in such adverts, or in the news, despite, or perhaps because of, media exposure reproduces the kind of (comfortable) non-involvement of protected and normalized populations, myself and most of the readership of this essay included, that is also part of biopolitical government. Thus, for PS and other critical branches of theory, it is fruitful and illuminating to deconstruct these cultural artefacts to reveal additional sites of power/knowledge relations (Roland, 2001).

Continuing with biopower, Van Munster has examined how in the United States, upon the state switching to a preventionist security doctrine, security discourses in the country have “become increasingly dominated by the logic risk management”. These discourses produce a myriad of effects through the reasoning of the statistical potential of risky populations (Van Munster, 2004, p. 147). After September 11<sup>th</sup>, through productive power which culminated in the powerful discourse of ‘the war on terror’, brand new knowledge had been created by which to shape the values and behaviour of some people and to completely redefine the identity of others (Karampampas, 2009, p. 36). Bennett and Duvall note how bodies of knowledge create subjects (2005, p. 62), in the case of ‘the war on terror’, the subjects created were ‘terrorists’. Van Munster notes a discrepancy in the language used in the ‘war on terror’, despite being labelled as a ‘war’, terrorist actors are not considered legitimate participants of war and are criminalised and delegitimised as a consequence (2004, p. 148). Through this it is apparent that such productive power is the driving force by which lives are to be included or excluded from the “realm of the political” (Masters, 2009, p. 40).

This externalisation of actors, groups and states marked through the brand of terrorism can be seen to be the recipients of biopolitical-fuelled sovereign power, which grants the ability for one imbued with such power to “kill, maim, rape, incarcerate, silence and exclude all in the name of making live.” (Masters, 2009, p. 31) Sufficiently developed, Foucault identifies the dynamics of power/knowledge as forming “a grid of intelligibility of the social order” (1978, p. 93). Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero understand this grid to function as an evaluating mechanism of subjects, a means by which meanings and social objects are “weighed, distributed, valued” (2008, p. 272). Combined with the productive discourses of ‘the war on terror’, these evaluating mechanisms can be witnessed in one example in the US were the ‘Computer Assisted Passenger Pre-Screening’ (CAPPs) system which constructs different levels of (in)security determined by statistical risk evaluation by assigning all passengers one of three identities: red, yellow and green. The yellow identity is automatically assigned to Muslim individuals travelling from the Middle East (Ramonet, 2003, p. 1). Here we can see how the constructions of these discourses on terrorism have depicted the population of an entire region as potentially threatening and through further analysis, Van Munster takes this example, illuminated by the PS ideas of power, and expands the idea of the self/other distinction. Rather than physically excluding the other from the self, Van Munster argues that the yellowing of Muslim passengers is a form of “inclusive exclusion” (2004, p. 151). The inclusion of the other within a social order through preventative risk assessment as a system of biopolitical control (in the realm of air travel, in this case), from this Van Munster borrows from Agamben’s thinking to posit that “all life” is now bare life “until class credentials prove otherwise” (2004, p. 152). The production of bare life is conjoined with the production of knowledge which itself is heavily related to the deeply embedded yet widely dispersed surveillance to gather risk information in which the decisions of identity are made from (Van Munster, 2004, p. 152) through which thanatopolitics is exercised; the destructive facet of biopolitics (Kelly, 2010, p. 5). Bare life is a state of continuous performance it is one that is reduced to a damaged form of life, one of political insignificance, made possible through the political realm itself (Ziarek, 2012, p. 194). Through discursive and visual modes of representation, productive enclosures of space and sovereign creations of states of exception that fuel the production of bare life, those who become bare life tread the thin line between life and death, inclusion and exclusion (Sowah. 2014, 1-2).

Compounding on the idea of inclusion/exclusion, the concept of biopower can be fruitfully entwined with geopolitics to examine the discrepancy that biopower can reveal between physical borders and what Kelly calls “biopolitical borders” (Kelly, 2010, p. 5). The difference between the two is that while the former demarcates territories, the latter divides populations (Kelly, 2010, p. 6). Walters’ suggests that biopolitical borders are progressively replacing geopolitical ones, citing the European ‘Schengeland’ as one such example such physical barriers to movement are dissolving the old, individual nation-state populations, demarcated by biopolitics, remain (Walters, 2002). It is similar

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with migrants who find themselves able to cross physical borders yet remain biopolitically excluded, be it socially or legally (Kelly, 2010, pp. 6-7).

The benign biopolitics of the Millennium Development Goals can be viewed as an explicit figurehead for a multiplicity of actions and discourses seeking to shape the populations of numerous countries. For many, the Goals are couched in an idea of emancipation from the insecurity of poverty. Under the mainstream, they associate security as being a crucial element of freedom with another element of both negative and positive freedom is being liberated from coercive power. PS somewhat denies this, with Foucault arguing that liberty, like power, is an exercisable practice (Foucault, 2003). It is through productive power that fictional universal concepts such as liberty can be broken down to reveal the inner discourse which works to shape the very objects and political terrain that would constitute being 'free' (Brown, 2006, p. 76).

## Conclusion

To summarise, I have detailed a theoretical overview of the PS understanding of power in the general in the first section. Here I highlighted the entwinement of power with knowledge, the properties of power, its location and its productive potential. It was here I also contrasted this PS understanding with the mainstream conception of power, highlighting the key ways in which they diverge and contest. In the second section I exhibited specific appropriated understandings of biopower and disciplinary power and located them in the topics of 'the war on terror', geopolitical borders, and representation and construction of individuals. The utility and the illuminating potential of productive power comes from the fact that the PS understanding of power deviates extensively from the conventional understanding of power. While power is traditionally viewed negatively and as destructive, coercive and so on, the PS view is much more agnostic about moralising its conception of power. As Foucault himself said, "We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms." (Foucault, 1977, p. 194) As touched upon in the last paragraph regarding liberty, the PS conception of power hints at an entirely different morality of power. Such an investigation into the ethics of PS and its conception of power, as done in (Lawler, 2008), would be a compelling and rewarding next area of enquiry.

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## Endnotes

[1] While I am aware that no single theorist can be said to define PS as a discipline, Foucault's work on power is the most lucid and influential on the topic and is thus the reason I will be using it as synonymous with a 'PS understanding / conception of power'.

[2] Henceforth I shall use interchangeably with 'PS conception(s) / understanding of power'.

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