

Discourse, Power, and Subjectivity in Global Politics

Written by Ty Solomon

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TY SOLOMON, NOV 18 2016

How are some discourses more powerful than others? Why do some kinds of discourses resonate more widely than others? One need only look around at recent politics in the US and the UK, for example, to see the crucial importance of these questions. With the British public recently voting for “Brexit,” and considerable numbers of Americans reacting favorably to Donald Trump, it is imperative that International Relations (IR) scholars develop frameworks that are able to grapple with the complex politics of language, affect/emotion, and subjectivity. As the public debate surrounding “Brexit” often revolved around contestations over British national identity, and Trump’s heated rhetoric taps into strands of American nationalism, these and other contemporary debates often hinge on the processes through which collective subjects – the collective “us” – are produced through eliciting particular kinds of emotional responses. People become affectively attached and invested in the images of the national “we” that are presented to them.

Who we are – our identities as subjects – is intimately bound to the power of language. Although the study of identity and discourse has been a part of IR for some time (Campbell 1998; Hansen 2006), their relationship to emotional factors such as desire has largely been downplayed. This is key because desire is the basic dynamic driving the social construction process in general and the social construction of subjectivity in particular. In my book, *The Politics of Subjectivity in American Foreign Policy Discourses*, I develop a framework that analyzes how these factors interweave to produce political subjects – the collective *us*. Consequently, these factors underpin the power and effectiveness of political language. In doing so, the framework takes a useful step forward in IR theory because it helps to analytically pinpoint why certain kinds of narratives are more likely sources of emotional investment – and therefore more likely to be politically efficacious – than others. Consequently, the framework unpacks the key elements that sustain political notions that are taken to be “common sense.” That is, the framework highlights the emotional investments of desire in the constructs of identity that narratives of political “common sense” often offer.

Emotional factors such as desire are in fact necessary to analytically grasp the power of political discourses. The emotional pull of desire – desire for a secure and stable “sense of self” – is intimately related to the intrinsic insecurity of being a subject and of having an identity. This insecurity – that social identities are ultimately fluid and can never be fully fixed or secured – sparks the desire for security and stability, even if such attainments are impossible (Lacan 2006; Stavrakakis 1999). In this sense, people often identify with political symbols because they desire the security that such symbols seem to promise in discourses attempting to define who we are (such as the seeming clarity of a “you’re either with us or against us” world of a “war on terror”). These symbols – and audiences’ identifications with them – are often powerful precisely because they are underpinned and sustained by deeply registered emotional investments of desire.

Lacan’s framework is helpful precisely because it explicitly highlights these tensions between insecure identities, on one hand, and how desire functions as the emotional catalyst prompting subjects to seek security, on the other hand. Most IR scholars who study the politics of language and identity have largely assumed that identity is insecure without offering an adequate account for why this is so or its full implications.[1] This, in turn, has led to a key yet underappreciated oversight in IR identity research. For thinking about “identity” as a continually insecure – and therefore continually frustrated – process immediately raises a crucial question: What prompts subjects to keep trying? What makes subjects believe that a secure, stable, and “full” identity is possible in the face of constant frustrations?

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Put differently, while many IR scholars recognize that the instability and ambiguity of language prevents the ultimate grounding of identity and subjectivity, few more fully unpack its implications. In a framework that accounts for the role of desire in human subjectivity, what we see is that the ambiguity of language not only prevents “full” subjectivity, but it is this very ambiguity that *draws in and elicits audiences to identify with certain instances of language in the first place*. Many Americans, for example, identified with discourses of “freedom” in the post-9/11 context not because its meaning was clear, but precisely because it wasn’t. “Freedom’s” ambiguity – its *lack* of fixed meaning – meant that it was able to elicit identifications from across the political spectrum as audiences “filled in” its ambiguity with their own subjectivity. As the book details, through this process, audiences became affectively invested in the images of the collective “we” (through signifiers like “freedom”) through the fusion of discourse, ambiguity, and desire.

Lacanian theory offers us a way to systematically think through the theoretical conundrums and oversights that are apparent in IR when asking these questions. It also points toward an empirical framework that illustrates how specific policy narratives negotiate this intrinsic insecurity and thus how they appeal to audiences and gain political legitimacy. The book combines this understanding of the social construction of subjectivity with Ernesto Laclau’s account of hegemonic politics. Laclau contends that political “common sense” is the result of discursive power to define the very parameters within which public debate occurs. For him, most of our time-honored political values are empty signifiers – that is, they have no intrinsic or natural meaning outside of the social meanings attributed to them. Again, all sides claim “freedom” in American political discourse, yet each side defines it differently, and political debates themselves are best understood as efforts to fix the meaning of such terms in particular ways. Laclau argues that this continual contestation – this “emptying” and “filling up” of key signifiers with meaning – is itself the key political process (Laclau 2005). I combine Lacan’s approach with Laclau’s emphasis on hegemonic politics. In this way, the book offers a way to analyze the politics of desire and subjectivity as the construction of common sense powerfully underpinned by emotional investments of desire.

The book deploys this approach to explore the politics of discursive appeal of both the post-9/11 war on terror and the ups and downs of neoconservative influence within US foreign policy debates. For example, although scholars from many perspectives have explored the war on terror, few works have examined precisely *how* the war on terror became solidified as “common sense” in the months and years following September 11, 2001. In other words, IR has yet to see a thorough accounting of how the intricate mingling of political language and emotional factors, such as desire, facilitated the power of the war on terror narrative to become a dominant discourse following September 11. This is critical because without this account, we are left without a full understanding of how many people came to see the war on terror as legitimate and, consequently, how it linguistically outmatched other political discourses to become the anchoring idea of American foreign policy in the new millennium. Although the events of September 11 could have been interpreted and understood in a myriad of ways (such as a “criminal act” to be prosecuted via police actions rather than a militarized global war, an attack not by vaguely defined “terrorists” but by a relatively small group of Saudi radicals, or as a moment to reflect on the global consequences of past US foreign policy actions, and so on) one narrative gained steam and became political “common sense” soon afterwards. A “war on terror” was not the “natural” response to the events of September 11, despite the fact that it is now widely viewed and felt to have been the only possible reaction. This seeming “natural-ness” and its political efficacy should be illuminated and unpacked.

Analyzing how this “war on terror” narrative “won” the discursive contest against other policy narratives is an empirical puzzle that conventional IR approaches have largely failed to explain due to their lack of analytical attention to the factors that attract audiences to some discourses over others in the first place. This dynamic then, leads to the setting of “acceptable” parameters of public debate, and, thereby, to the laying of the initial political groundwork for the policy program to follow. Such an analysis of how one policy discourse succeeds vis-à-vis others, calls for a different framework. This framework combines a focus not only on language and rhetoric but also on the identities and desires that are constructed and shaped by such discourses. The discourse of the “war on terror” was politically efficacious precisely because it was felt as a secure site of emotional investment on the part of American audiences. This aspect of emotional resonance provides a key analytical fulcrum to gain explanatory leverage over how this discourse became the dominant frame for the range of “thinkable” policy options following September 11.

Beyond the analysis of these specific debates, the framework of *The Politics of Subjectivity in American Foreign*

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Policy Discourses has the potential to travel to a wide variety of cases and contexts. For example, and following Moran M. Mandelbaum, the concept of desire-driven subjectivity, combined with a framework for understanding empty signifiers and hegemonic politics, can offer a novel understanding of the politics of the recent UK referendum vote. Cries of “we want our country back” projected particular images of Britain, Britishness, and Europe to UK audiences that actually had diverse reasons for supporting Brexit. Traditional Conservative skepticism toward Europe, economic conditions facilitated by years of austerity measures, ethnic and racial prejudice – no one reason explains how the Brexit campaign succeeded. Yet, the discourse they promoted exhibited enough ambiguity that it was able to draw in support from across the political spectrum. A similar dynamic was at work in Donald Trump’s campaign and recent election win in the US. “Make America Great Again,” Trump’s main campaign slogan, is highly vague yet contains just enough of a narrative that has enough appeal to enough constituencies that it helps to explain some of his political success. Cultivating deeper understandings of the links between discourse, desire, linguistic ambiguity, and the collective “us” will be crucial to further developing IR’s conceptualization of the power of language and the many forms it takes.

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[i] See, for example, Milliken (1999), Hansen (2006)

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