

# Poststructuralism

Written by Stephen McGlinchey, Rosie Walters and Dana Gold

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/05/20/poststructuralism/>

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**This feature is part of the online resources to accompany the textbook *Foundations of International Relations*.**

Poststructuralism is perhaps the most controversial of the critical theories as it questions the very beliefs we have all come to know and feel as being 'real'. Poststructuralists do this by critiquing the dominant narratives that have been widely accepted by other theories. These, they believe, have evolved into *metanarratives* – complex accounts explaining how the world works that are unquestioned by most people, but are really just convincing stories created by those in power. For instance, liberals and realists both accept the idea of the state and for the most part take it for granted. Such assumptions are foundational 'truths' on which those traditional theories rest – becoming 'structures' (or metanarratives) around which they build their account of reality. So, although these two theoretical families may seem to be in opposition, they actually share a general understanding of the world. Neither realism nor liberalism in their modern forms seek to challenge the existence of the state nor attempt to think beyond it – they simply count it as part of their reality. Poststructuralism seeks to question these commonly held assumptions of reality that are taken for granted, such as the state – but also more widely the nature of power.

For poststructuralists, supposedly common-sense understandings about a subject or cause do not simply describe the world around us – they reflect the power relations within it. And they also help to shape it. This is labelled as 'discourse'. The classic example is how language is used to give legitimacy to certain actions and to delegitimise others. We can see this in the labelling of somebody using violence for a political cause as either a 'terrorist' or a 'freedom fighter'. That labelling is almost always done by those in a position of power and it has profound consequences for the actions taken in relation to that person. For example, the labels of 'terrorist' or 'freedom fighter' don't simply describe a person, but instead reflect assumptions about a person's politics, the cause they are fighting for, the threat they pose to society and the supposed justification of the means they are using. Those assumptions are shaped by how we view other peoples, cultures, religions, ideologies and so on. And they can change with time and place. Many civil rights campaigners who are now celebrated were labelled terrorists in earlier times.

For poststructuralists, we can never experience anything outside discourse – that is through shared understandings that dominate our societies. As poststructuralists seek to question universal truths and metanarratives, the core of their theory is to actively choose *not* to take ideas as we know them for granted, nor to see certain paths of action as inevitable. Above all, poststructuralism encourages us to question how those in positions of power frame a particular issue and how doing so might serve to represent their interests and to shore up that position of power.

Text adapted from McGlinchey, Stephen (2022) *Foundations of International Relations*. London: Bloomsbury.

For much more on poststructuralism and other theories, you can download the free textbook, *International Relations Theory*.

**Below is a collection of freely accessible multimedia and textual resources that help unpack, and explain the importance of poststructuralist and related approaches to International Relations.**

Introducing Poststructuralism in International Relations Theory – article

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Introducing Queer Theory in International Relations – article

Securitisation Theory: An Introduction – article

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### **About the author:**

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