

## Chapter 7

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# Postmodernism

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Postmodernism remains among the most controversial of theories in the humanities and social sciences. It has regularly been accused of moral and political delinquency. Indeed, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, some commentators went so far as to blame postmodernism. In a time when moral certitude appeared to be necessary, postmodernism was charged with a dangerous tendency towards moral equivocation or even sympathy towards terrorism. If nothing else, these absurd allegations served to prove a central claim of postmodernism, that knowledge claims are intimately connected to politics and power. Moreover, as James Der Derian (2002: 15) has provocatively argued, despite everything that differentiates America's president, George W. Bush, from the terrorist leader behind the attacks, Osama bin Laden, they are united in their moral and epistemological certitude. It is precisely this conviction that their moral and epistemological claims are beyond question that postmodernism challenges.

Before continuing, we should point out that a great deal of disagreement exists as to what exactly 'postmodernism' means. The meaning of postmodernism is in dispute not just between proponents and critics, but also among proponents. Indeed, many theorists associated with postmodernism never use the term, sometimes preferring the term 'post-structuralism', sometimes 'deconstruction', sometimes rejecting any attempt at labelling altogether. In lieu of a clear or agreed definition of postmodernism this chapter adopts a pragmatic and nominalistic approach. Theorists who are referred to, or who regard their own writing, as postmodern, post-structuralist or deconstructive will be considered here as postmodern theorists.

The chapter is divided into four main sections. The first deals with the relationship between power and knowledge in the study of international relations. The second outlines the textual strategies employed by postmodern approaches. The third is concerned with how postmodernism deals with the state. The final part of the chapter outlines postmodernism's attempt to rethink the concept of the political.

## Power and knowledge in International Relations

Within orthodox social scientific accounts, knowledge ought to be immune from the influence of power. The study of international relations, or any scholarly study for that matter, is thought to require the suspension of values, interests and power relations in the pursuit of objective knowledge – knowledge uncontaminated by external influences and based on pure reason. Kant's (1970: 115) caution that 'the possession of power inevitably corrupts the free judgement of reason', stands as a classic example of this view. It is this view that Michel Foucault, and postmodernism generally, have begun to problematize.

Rather than treat the production of knowledge as simply a cognitive matter, postmodernism treats it as a normative and political matter (Shapiro 1999: 1). Foucault wanted to see if there was not some common matrix which hooked together the fields of knowledge and power. According to Foucault, there is a general consistency, which cannot be reduced to an identity, between modes of interpretation and operations of power. Power and knowledge are mutually supportive; they directly imply one another (Foucault 1977: 27). The task therefore is to see how operations of power fit with the wider social and political matrices of the modern world. For example, in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault investigates the possibility that the evolution of the penal system is intimately connected to the human sciences. His argument is that a 'single process of "epistemologico-juridical" formation' underlies the history of the prison on the one hand, and the human sciences on the other (1997: 23). In other words, the prison is consistent with modern society and modern modes of apprehending 'man's' world.

This type of analysis has been attempted in International Relations by various thinkers. Richard Ashley has exposed one dimension of the power-knowledge nexus by highlighting what Foucault calls the 'rule of immanence' between knowledge of the state and knowledge of 'man'. Ashley's (1989a) argument, stated simply, is that, '[m]odern statecraft is modern mancraft'. He seeks to demonstrate how the 'paradigm of sovereignty' simultaneously gives rise to a certain epistemological disposition and a certain account of modern political life. On the one hand, knowledge is thought to depend on the sovereignty of 'the heroic figure of reasoning man who knows that the order of the world is not God-given, that man is the origin of all knowledge, that responsibility for supplying meaning to history resides with man himself, and that, through reason, man may achieve total knowledge, total autonomy, and total power' (1989a: 264–5). On the other hand, modern political life finds in sovereignty its constitutive principle. The state is conceived by analogy with sovereign man as a pre-given, bounded entity which enters into relations

with other sovereign presences. Sovereignty acts as the 'master signifier' as Jenny Edkins and Véronique Pin-Fat (1999: 6) put it. Both 'Man' and the state are marked by the presence of sovereignty, which contrasts with international relations which is marked, and violently so, by the absence of sovereignty (or alternatively stated, the presence of multiple sovereignties). In short, both the theory and practice of international relations are conditioned by the constitutive principle of sovereignty.

## Genealogy

It is important to grasp the notion of genealogy, as it has become crucial to many postmodern perspectives in International Relations. Genealogy is, put simply, a style of historical thought which exposes and registers the significance of power-knowledge relations. It is perhaps best known through Nietzsche's radical assault on the concept of origins. As Roland Bleiker (2000: 25) explains, genealogies 'focus on the process by which we have constructed origins and given meaning to particular representations of the past, representations that continuously guide our daily lives and set clear limits to political and social options'. It is a form of history which historicizes those things which are thought to be beyond history, including those things or thoughts which have been buried, covered, or excluded from view in the writing and making of history.

In a sense genealogy is concerned with writing counter-histories which expose the processes of exclusion and covering which make possible the teleological idea of history as a unified story unfolding with a clear beginning, middle and end. History, from a genealogical perspective, does not evidence a gradual disclosure of truth and meaning. Rather, it stages 'the endlessly repeated play of dominations' (Foucault 1987: 228). History proceeds as a series of dominations and impositions in knowledge and power, and the task of the genealogist is to unravel history to reveal the multifarious trajectories that have been fostered or closed off in the constitution of subjects, objects, fields of action and domains of knowledge. Moreover, from a genealogical perspective there is not one single, grand history, but many interwoven histories varied in their rhythm, tempo, and power-knowledge effects.

Genealogy affirms a perspectivism which denies the capacity to identify origins and meanings in history objectively. A genealogical approach is anti-essentialist in orientation, affirming the idea that all knowledge is situated in a particular time and place and issues from a particular perspective. The subject of knowledge is situated in, and conditioned by, a political and historical context, and constrained to function with particular concepts and categories of knowledge. Knowledge is never unconditioned. As a consequence of the heterogeneity of possible contexts

and positions, there can be no single, Archimedean perspective which trumps all others. There is no 'truth', only competing perspectives. David Campbell's analysis of the Bosnian War in *National Deconstruction* (1998a) affirms this perspectivism. As he rightly reminds us, 'the same events can be represented in markedly different ways with significantly different effects' (1998a: 33). Indeed, the upshot of his analysis is that the Bosnian War can be known only through perspective.

In the absence of a universal frame of reference or overarching perspective, we are left with a plurality of perspectives. As Nietzsche (1969: III, 12) put it: 'There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective "knowing".' The modern idea, or ideal, of an objective or all-encompassing perspective is displaced in postmodernism by the Nietzschean recognition that there is always more than one perspective and that each perspective embodies a particular set of values. Moreover, these perspectives do not simply offer different views of the same 'real world'. The very *idea* of the 'real world' has been 'abolished' in Nietzsche's thought (1990: 50–1), leaving *only* perspectives, *only* interpretations of interpretations, or in Derrida's (1974: 158) terms, *only* 'textuality'.

Perspectives are thus not to be thought of as simply optical devices for apprehending the 'real world', such as a telescope or microscope, but also as the very fabric of that 'real world'. For postmodernism, following Nietzsche, perspectives are integral to the constitution of the 'real world', not just because they are our only access to it, but because they are basic and essential elements of it. The warp and woof of the 'real world' is woven out of perspectives and interpretations, none of which can claim to correspond to reality-in-itself, to be a 'view from nowhere', or to be exhaustive. Perspectives are thus component objects and events that go towards making up the 'real world'. In fact, we should say that there is no object or event outside or prior to perspective or narrative. As Campbell explains, after Hayden White, narrative is central, not just to understanding an event, but in constituting that event. This is what Campbell (1998a: 34) means by the 'narrativizing of reality'. According to such a conception events acquire the status of 'real' not because they occurred but because they are remembered and because they assume a place in a narrative (1998a: 36). Narrative is thus not simply a re-presentation of some prior event, it is the means by which the status of reality is conferred on events. But historical narratives also perform vital political functions in the present; they can be used as resources in contemporary political struggles (1998a: 84, 1999: 31).

The event designated by the name 'September 11' is a case in point. Is it best conceived as an act of terrorism, a criminal act, an act of evil, an act of war, or an act of revenge? Perhaps it is best thought of as an instance of 'Islamofascism' or the clash of civilization? Or perhaps

as 'blowback'? Furthermore, which specific acts of commission and omission constitute this event? Did 'September 11' begin at 8.45a.m. when American Airlines flight 11 crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Centre, or at 7.59a.m. when the plane departed from Boston? Did it commence when the perpetrators began planning and training for the attack? Or did it begin even earlier, as a reaction (however unjustified) to US Middle East policy? These questions show that the event of 'September 11' is only constituted in a narrative that integrates it into a sequence of other events and thereby confers significance upon it.

It may be that, as Jenny Edkins (2002: 245–6) says, events like 'September 11' cannot be experienced in any normal sense. Rather, they exceed experience and our normal social and linguistic frameworks. Nevertheless, there will be, as Campbell (2002a: 1) notes, struggles over the meaning of 'September 11'. He, like Edkins, cautions against a hasty attempt to fix the meaning of 'September 11'. In particular he shows that, despite the White House asserting the unprecedented nature of the September 11 attacks, the 'war on terrorism' has returned to past foreign policy practices; in his words, it has morphed into the Cold War (1999: 17). 'This return of the past means that we have different objects of enmity, different allies, but the same structure for relating to the world through foreign policy' (2002a: 18). Cynthia Weber (2002) makes a similar argument, suggesting instead that the Pearl Harbor attacks of 7 December 1941 provide an interpretive framework for the US military response today. 'September 11' is thus read as if it had the same meaning as '7 December'. For postmodernism, the representation of any political event will always be susceptible to competing interpretations.

Genealogy is a reminder of the essential agonism in the historical constitution of identities, unities, disciplines, subjects and objects. From this perspective, 'all history, including the production of order, [is comprehended] in terms of the endless power political clash of multiple wills' (Ashley 1987: 409). Metaphors of war and battle are central to genealogy. In a series of lectures given at the Collège de France in 1975–6 under the title 'Society Must be Defended', Foucault employs genealogy to analyze power relations in the state. He explores a historico-political discourse dating from the end of the civil and religious wars of the sixteenth century, that understood war to be 'a permanent social relationship, the ineradicable basis of all relations and institutions of power' (Foucault 2003: 49). This discourse, found in Sir Edward Coke, John Lilburne and Henri Comte de Boulainvilliers among others, challenged the prevailing assumption of the day that society is at peace. Instead, beneath the calm, peaceful order of law-governed society posited by philosophico-juridical discourses, this discourse perceives 'a sort of primitive and permanent war', according to Foucault (2003: 47).

Foucault (2003: 15) characterizes this discourse through an inversion of Clausewitz's famous proposition: 'politics is the continuation of war by other means'. Foucault means to analyse how war became viewed as an apt way of describing politics. He wants to know when political thought began to imagine, perhaps counter-intuitively, that war serves as a principle for the analysis of power relations within political order. This conflictual understanding of society is equally at odds with Kantian liberalism and Hobbesian realism. If anything, it seems to pre-empt Nietzsche's emphasis on struggle. Political power, instituted and legitimized in the sovereign state, does not bring war to an end; rather, 'In the smallest of its cogs, peace is waging a secret war' (2003: 50). This 'war discourse' posits a binary structure that pervades civil society, wherein one group is pitted against another in continuing struggle.

Foucault (1987: 236) claims as one of genealogy's express purposes the 'systematic dissociation of identity'. There are two dimensions to this purpose. First, it has a purpose at the ontological level: to avoid substituting causes for effects (metalepsis). It does not take identity or agency as given but seeks to account for the forces which underwrite this apparent agency. Identity or agency is an *effect* to be explained, not assumed. This means resisting the temptation to attribute essences to agents, things or events in history, and requires a transformation of the question 'what is?' into 'how is?' For Nietzsche, Foucault and thus post-modernism, it is more important to determine the forces that give shape to an event or a thing than to attempt to identify its hidden, fixed essence. Secondly, it has an ethico-political purpose in problematizing prevailing identity formations which appear normal or natural. It refuses to use history for the purpose of affirming present identities, preferring to use it instead to disturb identities that have become dogmatized, conventionalized or normalized.

A good example of this genealogical method is to be found in Maja Zehfuss's (2003) analysis of 'September 11' and the war on terrorism. She challenges assumptions about unified agency and about the relationship between causes and effects. As she points out, to imply that the events of 'September 11' were an attack on 'the West', as the US and UK governments do, is to ignore the ambiguous character of Western identity. At a minimum, it is to ignore the fact that Western nations are complicit with the technologies and perpetrators, but it also ignores political dissent from those who do not wish the memory of the dead to be used to perpetuate further violence (2003: 524–5). Following Nietzsche, Zehfuss (2003: 522) also questions cause-and-effect thinking; 'cause and effect are ... never as easily separated' as they appear to be. For example, governments leading the so-called war on terrorism imply that 'September 11' *caused* the war on terrorism. It is as if 'September 11'

were ‘an “uncaused” cause’ (Zehfuss 2003: 521), or as if, in Judith Butler’s (2004: 6) words, ‘There is no relevant prehistory to the events of September 11’. But this ignores a good deal of prior political history which is essential to any adequate understanding.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that genealogy focuses only on what is forgotten. Zehfuss draws our attention to the politics of memory also. She points out that both Osama bin Laden and President George W. Bush want the world to remember the events of September 11. Bin Laden wants the world to remember the humbling of a hyperpower, Bush wants the world to remember the loss of innocent life. Both, Zehfuss’s says (2003: 514), ‘have an interest in our memory of the events’. Zehfuss’s (2003: 525) argument is that a ‘certain way of using memory has become politically powerful’, especially in the United States, where the White House has exploited the memory of ‘September 11’ to justify the curtailment of civil liberties at home, and an aggressive military response abroad. Her point is that we need to forget the dominant narratives before we can understand what makes ‘September 11’ a distinctive event.

It is in view of such genealogical analyses as these that we can understand Foucault’s (1977: 31) attempt at ‘writing the history of the present’. A history of the present asks: How have we made the present seem like a normal or natural condition? What has been forgotten and what has been remembered in history in order to legitimize the present and present courses of action?

One of the important insights of postmodernism, with its focus on the power–knowledge nexus and its genealogical approach, is that many of the problems and issues studied in International Relations are not just matters of epistemology and ontology, but of *power* and *authority*; they are struggles to impose authoritative interpretations of international relations. As Derrida (2003: 105) himself says in an interview conducted after September 11: ‘We must also recognize here the strategies and relations of power. The dominant power is the one that manages to impose and, thus, to legitimate, indeed to legalize ... on a national or world stage, the terminology and thus the interpretation that best suits it in a given situation’. The following section outlines a strategy which is concerned with destabilizing dominant interpretations by showing how every interpretation systematically depends on that for which it cannot account.

## **Textual strategies of postmodernism**

Der Derian (1989: 6) contends that postmodernism is concerned with exposing the ‘textual interplay behind power politics’. It might be better

to say it is concerned with exposing the textual interplay *within* power politics, for the effects of textuality do not remain behind politics, but are intrinsic to them. The 'reality' of power politics (like any social reality) is always already constituted through textuality and inscribed modes of representation. It is in this sense that David Campbell (1992) refers to 'writing' security, Gearóid Ó Tuathail (1996) refers to 'writing' global space, and Cynthia Weber (1995) refers to 'writing' the state. Two questions arise: (1) what is meant by textual interplay? and (2) how, by using what methods and strategies, does postmodernism seek to disclose this textual interplay?

Textuality is a common postmodern theme. It stems mainly from Derrida's redefinition of 'text' in *Of Grammatology* (1974). It is important to clarify what Derrida means by 'text'. He is not restricting its meaning to literature and the realm of ideas, as some have mistakenly thought, rather, he is implying that the world is *also* a text—or, better, the 'real' world is constituted like a text, and 'one cannot refer to this "real" except in an interpretive experience' (Derrida 1988: 148). Postmodernism firmly regards interpretation as necessary and fundamental to the constitution of the social world, and it is for this reason that Derrida (1978: 278) quotes Montaigne: 'We need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things.' 'Textual interplay' refers to the supplementary and mutually constitutive relationship between different interpretations in the representation and constitution of the world. In order to tease out the textual interplay, postmodernism deploys the strategies of *deconstruction* and *double reading*.

## Deconstruction

Deconstruction is a general mode of radically unsettling what are taken to be stable concepts and conceptual oppositions. Its main point is to demonstrate the effects and costs produced by the settled concepts and oppositions, to disclose the parasitical relationship between opposed terms and to attempt a displacement of them. According to Derrida conceptual oppositions are never simply neutral but are inevitably hierarchical. One of the two terms in the opposition is privileged over the other. This privileged term supposedly connotes a presence, propriety, fullness, purity, or identity which the other lacks (for example, sovereignty as opposed to anarchy). Deconstruction attempts to show that such oppositions are untenable, as each term *always already* depends on the other. Indeed, the prized term gains its privilege only by disavowing its dependence on the subordinate term.

From a postmodern perspective, the apparently clear opposition between two terms is neither clear nor oppositional. Derrida often



speaks of this relationship in terms of a structural parasitism and contamination, as each term is structurally related to, and already harbours, the other. Difference *between* the two opposed concepts or terms is always accompanied by a veiled difference *within* each term. Neither term is pure, self-same, complete in itself, or completely closed off from the other, though as much is feigned. This implies that totalities, whether conceptual or social, are never fully present and properly established. Moreover, there is no pure stability, only more or less successful stabilizations as there is a certain amount of 'play', or 'give', in the structure of the opposition.

As a general mode of unsettling, deconstruction is particularly concerned with locating those elements of instability or 'give' which ineradicably threaten any totality. Nevertheless, it must still account for stabilizations (or stability-effects). It is this equal concern with undoing or deconstitution (or at least their ever-present possibility) which marks off deconstruction from other more familiar modes of interpretation. To summarize, deconstruction is concerned with both the constitution and deconstitution of any totality, whether a text, theory, discourse, structure, edifice, assemblage, or institution.

### Double reading

Derrida seeks to expose this relationship between stability-effects and destabilizations by passing through two readings in any analysis. As expressed by Derrida (1981: 6), double reading is essentially a duplicitous strategy which is 'simultaneously faithful and violent'. The first reading is a commentary or repetition of the dominant interpretation – that is, a reading which demonstrates how a text, discourse or institution achieves the stability-effect. It faithfully recounts the dominant story by building on the same foundational assumptions, and repeating conventional steps in the argument. The point here is to demonstrate how the text, discourse, or institution appears coherent and consistent with itself. It is concerned, in short, to elaborate how the identity of a text, discourse, or institution is put together or constituted. Rather than yield to the monologic first reading, the second, counter-memorializing reading unsettles it by applying pressure to those points of instability within a text, discourse, or institution. It exposes the internal tensions and how they are (incompletely) covered over or expelled. The text, discourse, or institution is never completely at one with itself, but always carries within it elements of tension and crisis which render the whole thing less than stable.

The task of double reading as a mode of deconstruction is to understand how a discourse or social institution is assembled or put together, but