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Beyond a historicism without subject: Agency and the elusive genealogies of state sovereignty

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Abstract: This article seeks to account for the theoretical contributions of poststructuralism to the issues of social and historical change in international relations. The author argues that despite poststructuralism's contributions, both to the ongoing metatheoretical debates in the field about the reifying and naturalising tendencies of positivism in the study of International Relations and to the understanding of language and discourses in the formation of evolving relations of power, poststructuralism did not manage to escape the pitfalls and lacunas of reification, functionalism and structuralism.

Subjects: Contemporary Social Theory; International Relations Theory; Political Sociology; Social Theory; Sociology & Social Policy; Theory & Political Sociology

Keywords: poststructuralism; international relations, reification, discourse, language; agency, historical change

1. Introduction

As a predominantly American academic discipline, the theorisation of IR has been shaped by the will of its most influential practitioners to design tools that could either be used to advise the Prince about the proper way to confront outside dangers, or alternatively to rationalise its decisions in scientific terms. Despite the evolving controversies regarding the proper way to theorise international phenomenon within mainstream academia, there remains a stern consensus regarding the “proper way” to design scientific and value-free research. Hence, mainstream scholars have been active in policing the frontiers of their discipline and denying entry to unwanted dissidents that could challenge the established status quo.

At the end of the 1980s, a “horde of alien scholars” whose works have been inspired by the “discursive turn” of Continental philosophers assailed the frontiers of the discipline of IR. Since the 1950s, American mainstream IR scholarship has indeed been active in disciplining any forms of



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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This article seeks to account for the theoretical contributions of poststructuralism to the issues of social and historical change in international relations. The author argues that despite poststructuralism's contributions both to the ongoing metatheoretical debates in the field about the reifying and naturalizing tendencies of positivism in the study of International Relations and to the understanding of language and discourses in the formation of evolving relations of power, poststructuralism did not managed to escape the pitfalls and lacunas of reification, functionalism and structuralism.

deviation from the accepted standard of “value-free” positive science and silenced any attempts to integrate the issue of social change in the discipline. In this regard, the principal objective of these dissident voices was to foster a metatheoretical reflection on the uncontested status of positivist epistemology within the discipline in drawing a particular attention to the intimate relation between power and knowledge. In doing so, Poststructuralist¹ scholarship sought concurrently to open a space within the discipline for debating about the status of the so-called unchanging and timeless features of the bellicose international system characterised by the state of anarchy in a world of fully formed sovereign states endlessly confronting “objective” security dilemmas. Thus, Poststructuralism sought to shed new theoretical light on the issue of socio-historical change overshadowed by the discipline, with a particular emphasis on the issue of the socially (discursively) constructed nature of power and knowledge.

This paper aims at critically assessing the theoretical contributions made by these scholars regarding the issue of social and historical change. I argue that despite its contributions in fostering a metatheoretical reflection in the field regarding the reifying and naturalising functions of positivist epistemology in IR, and in shedding light on the role of language and discourse in shaping evolving power relations, Poststructuralists’ heuristic project has not managed to escape the pitfalls of reification, functionalism and structuralism. This paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, I analyse Poststructuralists’ epistemological reflection regarding the constitutive relation between power, knowledge and discourse. I argue that despite its valid critique of positivist science and its silence regarding issue of historical change, Poststructuralism’s own remedy remains prisoner of a form of stasis. I argue that its rejection of meta-narratives and of historical epistemology condemn Poststructuralism to episodic representations of changing social orders whose only point of focus is toward the contingent relation between power and knowledge within a given linguistic economy of discourse. I argue that if Poststructuralism draws attention to the issue of change in pointing to moments of rupture in time, it explicitly eschews explanations of the *causes* of change.

In the second part, I argue that this nihilist posture regarding the causes of change does not only rest on a specific epistemological posture which denies metahistorical narratives, but on a specific ontology that evacuates the central role of purposeful acting subjects in the making of history. I argue that the “death of the subject” in Poststructuralist social theory of IR leads not only to an impoverishment of the conceptualisation of power relations, but represents a retreat from the project of fostering alternative ways to think of possible alternative social orders.

Lastly, in the third part of the paper, I draw attention to the antinomies between Poststructuralism’s rejection of metahistorical narratives and its inescapable necessity to mobilise established historiographical conventions regarding the segmentation of historical time. If Poststructuralism’s reflections on the evolving historical relationship between power and knowledge indeed present alternative interpretations of historical periods, I argue that its explicitly nihilist stance regarding explanations of epochal transformations may indeed tend to reproduce a top-down history of the past in which the textual remnants of an epoch, which are generally conceptions of the world left by powerful social groups, are mobilised as evidences of discursive structures of power in action.

2. Theorising power and the power of theorising

Poststructuralist scholarship presents its interventions in the field of IR as a politics of “dissent” from forms and representations of power drawing legitimacy from the legacy of the Enlightenment’s “Modernity project” (George, 1994; George & Campbell, 1990). It argues that IR scholarship has generally tended to uncritically embrace the Enlightenment’s representation of the almighty sovereign subject endowed with the capacity to shape his environment to his own will through the power of reason and scientific knowledge. It contends that the project of positive science builds on the problematic assumption of the presence of the sovereign subject as the Archimedean point from which Truth and meaning can be uncovered (Ashley, 1988). Poststructuralism argues that this is rather an untenable assumption in so far as it represents a world of objects internally related according to universal laws, having an existence independent of the interpretations and meanings of subjects

and merely waiting to be uncovered by the gaze of the sovereign knowing subject. If such a proposition seems dubious in natural sciences so far as the objects of enquiry and the guiding hypotheses of researches are rarely detached from social and institutional imperatives, it is rather an untenable proposition as a guiding tread for social sciences writ large, given the political character of any theorising about social phenomena (Bigo, 1995; Jones, 2006).

Nonetheless, mainstream IR scholarship has developed upon such an assumption, and has sought to discipline any deviations from its own standards of “scientific rigor” (George, 1993, 1994; Peterson, 2004; Vasquez, 1998). Poststructuralists’ dissent from IR mainstream scholarship pretence to produce objective enquiries abiding by the standards of positive science has been expressed through three core critiques. Firstly, in tandem with other critical approaches, Poststructuralism opposes the inherent ahistorical and essentialist underpinnings of positivist IR scholarship. The dubious pretence to uncover law-like regularities and the endeavour to produce knowledge that can be used to predict social outcomes rests, as it has been widely expressed within critical scholarships, on a static representation of the social world that writes off the possibility of change. This being said, the problematic absence of historical change from mainstream IR scholarship is not an issue; Poststructuralists contend, that can be solved by counter posing a historicist epistemology to a positivist one. While emphasising discontinuity and change and vehemently criticising positivists’ forms of reification, Poststructuralists concurrently consider as illusory any pretence to develop historically informed causal explanations of processes of change or to proceed otherwise through a hermeneutic of understanding (Bartelson, 1995, pp. 50–51). They reject all forms of “totalising” social theories—read all variants of Materialist approaches (Campbell, 1998, pp. 3–4; Kurzweil, 1977, p. 395; Malik, 1997, p. 177). Central to their position is a rebuttal of any pretension to explain—on the basis of a “narrativizing historiography”—the complexities of social relations of power from an inquiry into social structures taken *in their social totality* (Bartelson, 1995; Campbell, 1998, pp. 4–5; George, 1994, p. 192). Therefore, Poststructuralists refute the “(...) *logic of explanation* in which the purpose of the analysis is to identify those self-evident things and material causes so that actors can accommodate themselves to the realm of necessity they engender” (Campbell, 1998, p. 4; Original Emphasis). Indeed, they contend that such an endeavour requires a supra-historical vantage point that can never be concretely reached (Bartelson, 1995). Thus, if Poststructuralists stress discontinuity and change, it is only in so far as they celebrate the unstable, shifting and directionless nature of the social world (Windschuttle, 2000, pp. 136–137).

Secondly, supra-historical narratives are not only dismissed on the ground that they are always *interpretations* of the past in terms of the present, but more importantly because the subject/object relation is never a direct, unproblematic one (MacDonald, 1990, p. 235). Indeed, Poststructuralists contend that even critical approaches of IR do not escape the Modernist account of the sovereign all-knowing subject in searching for historically rooted explanations of change (Bartelson, 1995, pp. 50–51, 2001, p. 162). As far as language is not merely a mirror of “reality”, for it is constitutive of the subject’s perceptions and experiences of it, Poststructuralists conclude that “evidences” of the past do not speak for themselves outside of historically contingent discursive formations (Southgate, 2003, p. 75). Discursive and “non-discursive” are not discrete “realms” or “spheres” that can be grasped independently from another (Campbell, 1998, p. 6). Quoting Laclau and Mouffe, Campbell argues that “[w]hat is denied is not that [...] objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside of any discursive condition of emergence” (Idem). Indeed, it is argued that relations between subjects and the world of objects are mediated by language and discourses which are constitutive of identities, subjectivities and meanings. Thus, it is the antinomies of what is called the “logic of immediacy”—the unmediated representation of subject/object relation—that Poststructuralists endeavour to disclose (George, 1994). The unmediated access to the world of objects is posited as a logical impossibility insofar as there are no “self-constituted knowing subject” that escape the constitutive power of discourses. Hence, discourses foreclose the possibility of an impartial—that is not mediated by historically contingent subjectivities and identities—access to the realm of objects in constituting subjects’ identities and subjectivities.

According to Poststructuralists, the inescapable opacity of the subject/object relation is furthermore exemplified by the very conditions of existence of knowledge. In so far as knowledge invariably develops upon a historically contingent economy of discourses and discursive practices, it cannot be represented as a simple depiction of an objective reality waiting to be uncovered (Bartelson, 1995, p. 70). The production of knowledge is conditioned by a historically specific economy of discourses (Bevir, 1999, p. 66). It represents a system for the formation of valid statements, and more significantly, delimits what can and cannot be known (Bevir, 1999; Rosenthal, 1992). It thereby shapes perceptions, meanings, subjectivities and, accordingly, circumscribes the limits of actions and thoughts (Bartelson, 1995, p. 71, 2001, pp. 155–56; Fox, 1998, p. 417). As Bartelson claims: “[...] discourse is autonomous and has primacy [...] in its ability to organise knowledge systematically, so that some things become intelligible, and others not” (Bartelson, 1995, p. 71).

Thirdly, insofar as discourses are understood as historically contingent systems for the formation of valid statements which constitute the limits of the knowledgeable, they must be apprehended concurrently as systems that *produce* truth, *fix* meaning, *constitute* subject/object and, as such, *function* as mechanisms of power. Thus, it is concluded that the power effects of the positivist hegemonic representation of science as a rational and cumulative quest for objective knowledge must be disclosed. Poststructuralists aim to destabilise it in unveiling its mode of operation. It functions on an economy of discourse which circumscribes the limits of knowledge, disciplines the practice of knowing, shapes meanings and perceptions, and accordingly delimits the field in which political action takes place (Devetak, 1996; MacDonald, 1990, p. 229). IR is therefore apprehended as a field of power, in the sense that it operates and deploys itself on the basis of “discourses of truth”. As such, it rests on power relations as much as it produces and supports their operations. Following Foucault, Poststructuralists therefore contend that discourses of truth are always constitutive of an economy of power (Campbell, 1998, p. 7; Foucault, 1982, p. 779, 2003; George, 1994, p. 31, 191).

Since they argue that there is no unmediated access to objects, given that knowledge depends upon historically contingent discourses which delimit what can and cannot be known; given that they posit knowledge as power in its capacity to name, categorise and discipline subjects according to fix meanings and delimited fields of action; and that power is considered as productive of knowledge, for it can only operate on the basis of a discourse of truth, their epistemological stance foreordains their methodology in as much as their heuristic objectives (Bartelson, 1995, pp. 83–84; Campbell, 1998, p. 7; Foucault, 1982, p. 779, 2003; Fox, 1998, p. 417; George, 1994, pp. 30–31, 191; Zagorin, 1999, p. 7). Indeed, Poststructuralism rejects any pretence at achieving historically sophisticated explanations of social change that could transcend the ahistorical bias of positivist IR, for there are allegedly none. Accordingly, Poststructuralists are left with the Sisyphean task of endless deconstruction and genealogical analysis (Bartelson, 1998, p. 313).

Deconstruction is a method that takes as its primary source of analysis *texts*. They are expressions of historically contingent mode of operation of discourses. One of the central objectives of the deconstructive method is to disclose the hidden face of texts. More specifically, it seeks to highlight their mode of operation which invariably functions on the basis of dichotomies wherein one side is given higher and positive value (Der Derian, 1993; MacDonald, 1990, p. 231). Accordingly, it aims at disclosing the tensions that exist within a text between what is presented as the positive and thus valorised dimensions of a “reality”, and its negative and marginalised aspects without which the higher side of the dichotomy could not exist. In doing so, it aims at unveiling texts for what they are: not a corresponding image of reality, but merely a specific and partial “reading” of the world (Der Derian, 1993, pp. 86–87). As George contends: “The aim [...] [is] not to dismiss dominant readings but to illustrate that they are, indeed, *readings*—that they can be read in different ways and that their status is derived not from any correspondence with an essential (real) meaning but from a discursive strategy intrinsically connected to the dominant form of (sociohistorical) knowledge and power” (George, 1994, p. 192; Original emphasis).

It is in this sense that deconstructionists characterise their endeavour, not merely as a detached heuristic activity—a detached act of knowing, but rather as an active act of “political engagement” insofar as they seek to expose the power relations at play in the very process of knowing in order to destabilise their very modes of operation. This being said, the act of deconstruction can be characterised as “political” only in a restrictive sense. It is a “political engagement” which neither seeks to explain the origins, processes of formation and potential transformations of mechanisms of power/knowledge, nor to channel acts of resistance into specific transformative projects. As I have highlighted above, Poststructuralists deny this possibility on epistemological as much as on ethical grounds. On the one hand, since power is ubiquitous in as much as anonymous, and that it is inherently intermingled with knowledge, there can neither be a ground on which to apprehend the inner functioning of a given social totality outside a given regime of truth, nor the possibility to apprehend such totality, for allegedly none exist. On the other hand, channelling acts of resistance in a precise direction or to the fulfilment of a given political goal would be, in itself, a “totalitarian” act negating differences. Channelled and oriented resistance does not only deny differences, but is an objective doomed to fail. As we will see in the next section, Poststructuralists’ ontology of power denies the very possibility of acting subjects to overturn mechanisms of power and transcend power/knowledge. It is in this sense that I argue that this is less a “politics of dissent” than a “politics of despair”. Thus, as far as Poststructuralists fatalistically contemplate the ubiquity and anonymity of power, resistance takes only a reactive character. Accordingly, deconstruction can be characterised as a Sisyphean task, whose only purpose is to destabilise the homogenising and disciplining function of hegemonic discourses by disclosing the contested nature of reified meanings and essentialised identities. Accordingly, it presents itself as a politics that celebrates differences (George & Campbell, 1990).

Deconstruction can be characterised as a bounded reaction, for it remains trapped within the confines of the textual representations of hegemonic power/knowledge (McNally, 1997; Palmer, 1990). Indeed, the primacy that deconstructionists confer to texts reduces the functioning of what is understood as historically contingent mechanisms of power to textual expressions of dominant discursive representations of the world. In postulating, as I have pointed out above, the logical impossibility of explaining the material conditions of emergence of such forms of representations, and more specifically, the materiality of textual productions as such—their social and institutional conditions of existence—Poststructuralists’ deconstructive method achieves, at best, a very limited critique of past and present power relations. Indeed, I would argue that if we are to reject reified representations of power, we must begin by pointing to the *relational, historically situated* and *transient* character of social power. Power relations cannot be fully understood without an understanding of the varying ways in which they are expressed in concrete historical settings, which undeniably must account for the varying ways in which knowledge and discourses shape perceptions and subjectivity, hence circumscribing the *limites du possible* for counter-hegemonic political actions.

Methodologically, however, this central heuristic task *cannot* be fulfilled on the basis of deconstruction. Indeed, this method of analysis offers not only a very limited grasp of historically situated relations of power, as it merely aims to highlight given structures of enunciations as a way to highlight the power effects of the *inescapable* process of naming and categorising. Enclosing itself *within* the “discursive realm”, it is unable to relate systems of representation to historically specific materiality of power relations. Moreover, the so-called autonomy of texts and discourses to the “non-discursive” forecloses a reflexive stance relative to the selection of textual evidences per se. Indeed, if the deconstruction of texts allows, in principle, an understanding of the structural (hierarchical) relations of signs and concepts at a given historical juncture, it can only proceed on the basis of “textual sediments” of past and present mechanisms of power. It would be a truism to stress that in every class society, the materiality of such “systems of presentation”, which takes textual forms, has been widely created and diffused by literate casts that have been part or closely associated with the ruling classes. Therefore, deconstruction is condemned to remain trapped in an “history from above”, for the systems of representation and discursive practices of the subordinates can hardly be analysed on the basis of textual deconstruction of hegemonic practices and regimes of truth, given their marginal and subordinated status.² It is thus condemned to offer static pictures of the dynamics of

power at stake in eschewing the problematisation of the historically specific materiality of contending systems of representations. As Wood and Wood have soundly pointed out: “To understand answers offered by political theorists, we must know something about the questions they are trying to answer, and *different historical setting pose different set of questions*” (1997, p. 20; My emphasis). As Wood further points out, “[...] preoccupations with [discursive] structure abstracted from historical context may cause us to lose sight of the political dimension of a political theory, and an *interest in the political dimension means a return from abstraction to concrete historicity*” (1978, p. 365; My emphasis). Given Poststructuralists’ postulate that there are no supra-historical standpoint allowing for an explanation of the complex relations between historically specific material settings and the political set of questions they generate in the form of textual evidences, this crucial issue is beyond the reach of their theoretical scope (Kennedy, 1979, p. 272; Palmer, 1997, p. 67).

Whereas deconstruction remains trapped within the immediacy of hegemonic discourses and takes as its primary object of analysis the “discursive” in the form of texts, genealogy has been developed as a stepping stone to go beyond the focus on the discursive—the inner functioning, the “system of constraints”, of systems of representation—approached more or less independently from the “non-discursive” (Landry, 2000, p. 69; Palmer, 1990, pp. 26–27; Smart, 1982, p. 128). As McNally points out:

Foucault’s emphasis on power [exemplified in his genealogical turn] was an attempt to counter the political emptiness of theories that reduce social relations to their linguistic forms. [...] [H]e charged deconstruction with locating everything in texts “so as not to put discursive practices back into the field of transformations in which they are carried out”. (McNally, 1997, p. 29)

Genealogy therefore aims at delineating the relations of power that make possible the positivity of systems of representation. More particularly, it seeks to problematise the ways in which historically contingent economies of discourses are made possible by constellations of power relations arising *randomly* from regionally dispersed sets of institutions in the constitution of novel practices of knowing, which eventually form power mechanisms (*dispositifs de pouvoir*) (Foucault, 1977, 1978; cf. Brenner, 1994). As Shiner points out “Genealogy is the analysis of how one constellation of power/knowledge relations is displaced by another; it attends to the breaks that punctuate history” (1982, p. 387). It is in this limited sense that Poststructuralists can characterise their method of analysis as “historical”, for, contrary to positivist approaches, it stresses moments of discontinuity in time. However, I argue that such a “historical method” is of limited heuristic value, for it denies, as deconstruction method does, the capacity to explain the *processes* constitutive of the discontinuities it identifies (Palmer, 1990, p. 27). Indeed, whereas genealogists aim to delineate the constellation of power relations and institutions upon which an economy of discourses rests, they categorically refute the possibility of achieving explanations as to *how* and *why* transformations take specific forms, and not others (Bartelson, 1995; Brenner, 1994, p. 702; Der Derian, 1995; Seigel, 1990, p. 279). In other words, while it stresses discontinuity in time and space, it eschews explanations of the causes of processes of change. As Foster points out, this is a rather unsatisfactory methodological guide to understand the transient nature of power relations in time and space:

Although history has no single, definite, predetermined logic independent of human action and changing conditions, this is no reason to jettison the notion that everything has a cause(s); or the idea that the logic of historical enquiry involves precisely the search for those causal relationships, or determinate boundaries and framing of events, which we can ascertain. (1997, p. 189)

As McNally soundly argues:

[...] while disavowing enclosure within texts, Foucault himself fails to break out of discourse as a field closed in upon itself. Indeed, his whole concept of “power-knowledge” tends towards the position that power relations are constructed in and through practices of “knowing” humans. And these practices—of classifying, measuring, and surveying people—

originate in the realm of discourse, where people are assigned to different categories of thought and description. It follows that “the development of humanity is a series of interpretations”. Thus, for all his insights into social institutions and their practice of domination, Foucault reverts to his own version of discursive determinism [...]. (1997)

From this stance follows that the *historical processes* whereby human subjects are involved in the process of “making their own history in a context not of their own choosing”, to paraphrase Marx, are taken out of the realm of possible theoretical investigation. Poststructuralism thereby ends up as a mode of inquiry whose heuristic reach is delimited by its very own postulate stressing the primacy of historical contingency. Thus, even though its reflection on the political dimensions of knowledge may indeed destabilise hegemonic representations of knowledge in stressing their historical character, it concomitantly undermines the power and transformative potential of its critique in engaging the human subject within the confines of discourse.

3. The iron cage of discourse and the problematic absence of agency

As it has been pointed out in the first section, Poststructuralism posits the primacy and autonomy of discourses on epistemological grounds. Indeed, whereas it endeavours to challenge the Modernist conception of the unifying knowledgeable subject as the source of “truth” and knowledge, it concurrently rejects the notion that human agency is the source of history (Heartfield, 2002). Indeed, it contends that the privileged status of human subject as the maker of history rests on shallow ontological foundations which posit an unbridgeable distance between fully formed and unified subjects confronting a world of objects. It argues that such ontology produces and reproduces an artificial distance between subject and object. In contradistinction, Poststructuralism conceives subject and object as mutually constituted terms, rather than separate entities. Since it contends that the distance taken for granted by Modernist account of subject/object is only the product of its phantasmagorical representation of the almighty capacity of human subject to transform the world of objects to its own (unified) image, Poststructuralism’s intervention poses serious challenge to forms of theorising of power that hold, albeit in quite different ways, onto the idea that human cognition can make sense of past and present causes of social reality.

As it has been pointed out in the previous section, Poststructuralism refutes the capacity to achieve such a heuristic task, for without a unified knowledgeable subject as the source of truth, there can be no objective account of “historical movement”. Thus, rather than problematising power in terms of historically specific relations of subjections between living human subjects—that would presume the capacity of the knowledgeable subject to extirpate itself from such relations in order to account for them—Poststructuralism rather frames the problem in terms of how power itself produces subjects/objects. Such a standpoint not only circumscribes the limits of the knowledgeable—i.e. rejection of either causal historical narratives and hermeneutic of understanding—but more significantly ascribes a subordinated position to human subjects in its theorising of power/knowledge. Since it contends that power and knowledge are continuously intertwined, and that discourses of truth are their very condition of existence, there are accordingly no subjects that can escape the power of discourses. Power/Knowledge is the constitutive mechanism through which subjects/objects are produced and reproduced as mutually supportive “entities”.

Thus, Poststructuralists not only imprison the human subject within the iron cage of discourse, they equally posit it as a *passive relay* of his own subjection and objectivation³. Thus, its conceptualisation of power explicitly expunges from the reach of theoretical investigation the significance of the living acting subject, and shifts the focus on the notion of (ubiquitous) power/knowledge. It must be pointed out that such a shift entails a rebuttal of the traditional conceptualisation of power as differentiated access to historically specific institutional and material capacities to impose one’s will by force or by persuasion. Following Foucault, it contends that power is *neither* a thing that an agent possesses, *nor* a homogeneous act/system of domination of one class over another (Foucault, 1977, 2003). Power is ubiquitous in as much as discourses are authorless (Brenner, 1994, p. 683). Accordingly, power can neither properly be apprehended as a zero-sum game, for it would imply the capacity of

those “with” power to extirpate themselves from its grip, while those “without” would be wholly subjugated by it; nor can it be understood as a purely negative/repressive relationship, for it would deny its crucial productive and creative character (Hindess, 2005, p. 391; Smart, 2002, p. 77). Hence, power is neither something that can be grasped—like an asset—“won” or “lost”, “imposed upon” or “suffered by”, nor can it be transcended. It is rather reconceptualised as *multiple* chain-like relations—or networks—in which human subjects are continuously constituted as both subjects and objects of power/knowledge (Bartelson, 1995, pp. 78–79; Campbell, 1998; Foucault, 2003).

It is in this specific sense that power is conceptualised as both *productive* and *creative*. It produces and creates historically contingent subject as object and relay of power/knowledge. If power is considered as ubiquitous, its effects are never complete, for the discourse of truth upon which it rests never exhausts entirely the endless possibilities of meanings and subjectivities within a specific economy of discourses. It is, therefore, characterised as a strategic model of action *upon* actions (Bartelson, 1995, p. 80, 2001, p. 174; Reid, 2003, p. 4). This is opposed to social relations of power of subjects over other subjects. This conception of power as a strategic model of power involves, as it becomes plainly explicit, a retreat from theorising social dynamics and relations based on a problematising of the historically specific ways in which differentiated groups of agents develop distinctive strategies of power/action/resistance to ensure their social reproduction within an institutional context not of their own choosing.

Since it conceptualises the human subject as a mere relay in an endless cobweb of power relations and, as such, simultaneously object *and* subject of power/knowledge, Poststructuralists contend that it must be decentred from theorising (Bartelson, 1995; Campbell, 1998, p. 5; Edkins, 1999, p. 41; Foucault, 2003). Accordingly, Poststructuralists insist on forsaking a theory of power which either posits—like rationalist approaches—or problematises—like hermeneutic or historical materialist approaches—subjects’ intentionality and rationality as the prime analytical focus of social theory (Bartelson, 1995, pp. 54–58; Fox, 1998; Kennedy, 1979, p. 274). In other words, social theory ought to forsake an analysis of power centred on humans’ purposive actions or rational conducts (Fitzhugh & Leckie, 2001, p. 65). It rather celebrates, as Foucault contends, the “death of the subject” (Honneth, 1991).

It is rather on the plane of its historically contingent mode of operation—so-called *dispositifs de pouvoir* and regimes of truth—that it must be apprehended. As it has been made explicit in the first section of this paper, this proceeds at a level of historically contingent discursive structures. In so far as it is argued that discourses arise randomly from regionally dispersed settings to eventually form power mechanisms—*dispositifs de pouvoir*—and given that power relations are not apprehended on the basis the of subject’s purposive actions, but rather from the vantage point of its mode of operation (i.e. how power *functions*), it follows that Poststructuralists celebrate the problematic notion of history without subjects (Aschley, 1997; Bartelson, 1995, Chap. 3; Cassell, 1993, p. 232; Honneth, 1991, p. 112; McNally, 1997, p. 26). Such “history” is founded not only on an epistemology which posits the incapacity of knowing subjects to transcend the power of knowledge and systems of representation, and that concurrently rejects the very possibility of existence of forms of knowledge that could stimulate the conscious and purposive collective actions of subjects in order to overcome oppressive and exploitative power relations. But it is no less significantly founded on an ontology of power which indifferently encompass all human spheres and subordinate it to the ubiquitous and anonymous power of discourse. Such ontology, I argue, expunges from the scope of theoretical investigation the historically specific capacities—albeit sometimes limited but nonetheless potential—of agency to act creatively and purposively in the world and, more significantly, to develop modes of collective—both material and symbolic—empowerment that might challenge oppressive and exploitive forms and structures of power to potentially transform their very dynamics (Brenner, 1994, p. 702; Palmer, 1990, p. 28).

The problematic (or absence of) position of the human subject in Poststructuralist social theory—which reduces it to the *function* of a relay or a symptom of power relations—in conjunction with its

undifferentiated conceptualisation of power/knowledge *qua* discourse has exposed it to significant critiques. Indeed, in so far as its *raison d'être* has been to challenge the legacy of Modernity for its inherent tendency to reify everything that passes under its gaze, to fix identities and subordinate “reality” to the whim of Reason and transcendent Knowledge, it could equally be argued that Poststructuralism has not escaped the pitfalls of reification and essentialism. Furthermore, as some critiques have soundly argued, it has never totally managed to break the fetters of functionalism and of a certain form of “back door determinism” that it originally sought to challenge (Brenner, 1994, p. 680; Cassell, 1993, p. 232; Fox, 1998, p. 98; McNally, 2001; Palmer, 1990, p. 5; Thompson, 1978). The critiques of reification, essentialism and functionalism represent perhaps the most vivid points regarding the antinomies of Poststructuralism. I will address these in turn.

Firstly, as it has been discussed thus far, Poststructuralists’ epistemological and ontological stance rests on a conception of knowledge and of agency that radically dispossess the capacity of living subject to understand the historically specific social dynamics of power so as to act upon them in order to transform and transcend them. As it has been pointed out, there exists a so-called logical impossibility for the knowing subject to transcend existing power relations through the power of reason, for he/she is inescapably engaged within the structures of existing regimes of truth. In so far as knowledge depends on discourse and that allegedly no one can escape its power, the only avenue for political action left is to destabilise discourses of truth through deconstruction and genealogy. These practices, as I have pointed out, build on an explicit rebuttal of historical contextualisation defined as a practice that seeks to problematise the historically specific relations between systems and modes of representations and material and institutional practices and dynamics. Since, contextualisation as defined above is an impossibility, given the alleged incapacity of a knowing subject to reach a metahistorical standpoint; that moreover discourses are posited as *autonomous* in their capacity to determine what can and cannot be known, named and classified; and that living subjects are ascribed in its social theory the *passive* status of mere *relay* in cobweb of power/knowledge relations, it follows that the singularity of discourses of truth and *dispositifs de pouvoir* can only be apprehended at the structural level: their modes of operation. Most significantly, they are ascribed an omnipotent status in the *structuring* of power relations. In fact, since discourses of truth are authorless and possess dynamics of their own, outside of the volition of purposive human subjects, we are left with a history whose only subjects are discourses themselves. In this context, poststructuralism unveils itself as an inverted form of structuralism.

Second, power upon which (reified) discourse rests and that it concurrently generates and reproduces takes the Nietzschean form of a transcendental, omnipotent and ubiquitous *will to power*⁴. Indeed, since Poststructuralism ascribe to the living subject the position of a relay through which power transits, and that it eschews an understanding of power on the basis of an analysis of the purposive actions of living human subjects, the emergence and formation of power relations can only derive from a universal will of power to discipline, tame, fix, categorise and submit living subjects to the status of objects of knowledge. In other words, Poststructuralism ends up with a self-referential and circular ontology. Indeed, on the one hand, it paradoxically represents implicitly the “essence” of power as a *transcendental will to power/knowledge* manifesting itself in and through historically contingent discourses of truth and disciplinary practices. On the other hand, discourses of truth are apprehended as expressions, or more precisely, as the symptomatic manifestations of *power in action*.

Third, in so far as it rejects an analysis of power relations through the prism of agency and that it eschews explanation of their historical processes of formation and transformation, Poststructuralism’s sole analytical focus remains what Brenner characterises as a *functional analysis of power* (1994). From what has been discussed above, such functional analysis of power focuses on the mode of operation through which power subjugates human subjects through knowledge and disciplinary practices. Although, as it has been pointed out previously, Poststructuralism rejects the notion of a unifying social system functioning according to a single set of social imperatives, it nevertheless tentatively endeavours to disclose the haphazard and random contexts in which heterogeneous

practices of power/knowledge emerge in different institutional settings so as to form a system operating according to similar functional imperatives (Brenner, 1994, p. 687). As the latter soundly points out, such a functional analysis represents an impoverishment of social theory in so far as it leaves no avenue to problematise the question of *practices of resistance* outside of the functional representation of the operation of power. As Brenner concludes, at best it merely integrates resistance as heterogeneous *counter-functions* within a given *dispositif*:

[...] one major implication of Foucault's genealogical distance from the problem of human agency is an objectivist, functionalist mode of analysis which cannot adequately distinguish power from resistance. The consequence of Foucault's "death of man," in short, is a sociologically *problematic inability to explain how historical forms of domination are generated, reproduced, resisted, rearranged, and transformed through diverse modes of individual and collective practice* [...]. (1994; My emphasis)

This has obviously significant implications for its capacity to transcend the prevailing ahistorical modes of analysis in IR and to offer an alternative to grasp the significance of social and institutional change through a critical theory of IR.

4. Theorising historical change: contingency, randomness and the problem of causality

At the core of Poststructuralism's project lies what I consider as an unsolvable tension between its asserted endeavour to denaturalise dynamics of power in disclosing the constitutive role of knowledge and discourse in producing historically contingent forms of power, and its contention that explanations of processes of social and institutional change is inaccessible to human cognition. In a nutshell, this point of tension lies in the opposition between an emphasis on the contingent and random character of social phenomenon, which aims to challenge ahistorical and essentialist conceptions of power relations in order to stress their social and transient nature, and a nihilist posture regarding the crucial issue of explaining how historical time is punctuated by moments of rupture and why social change takes specific forms and not others. Whereas the critique of essentialism and ahistoricism represents potentially an empowering reflexive theoretical posture that opens a space for contestation and potential social transformation, the nihilist posture regarding the explanation of processes of change is rather disempowering for it posits the impossibility of explaining how and why given social dynamics are made and transformed by the practices of living human subjects.

Such a politic of despair theoretically translates into what I have characterised in the second section of this paper as an inverted form of structuralism. Whereas structural analysis may be considered as a legitimate entry point for an understanding of the inner functioning and reproductive logic of a given social structure (either material, symbolic or discursive) at a given juncture, its forsaking of human agency makes it nevertheless ill equipped, to say the least, to explain the manifold *practices* conducive to processes of (structural) change. Although Poststructuralism has no pretence to explain the causes of change or transformations in world historical time, its methods of analysis (deconstruction and genealogy) must inescapably take anchorage in given temporal and spatial contexts. It must therefore proceed from given scholarly conventions regarding the segmentation of historical time (i.e. historical periods) and build accordingly on past and present vestiges of human activities in order to problematise the historically contingent functioning of Power/Knowledge mechanisms. Interestingly, Poststructuralists' interventions in the field of IR have generally been laid down upon the conventional segmentation of world historical time into what has generally been understood as Medieval, Classical (or early modern) and Modern periods. Whereas Poststructuralists, as I have pointed out, remain agnostic regarding the proper way to explain the causes that punctuate world historical time, they nevertheless generally accept the notion that these periods are radically distinctive regarding the mode of operation of discourses and power/knowledge. They may disagree with traditional readings about what constitutes the specificities of those periods, but they nonetheless work within the confines of established segmentations of world historical time. I argue that such a stance not only limits the reach of Poststructuralism's critique of the ahistorical

character of mainstream discourses of IR, but more significantly that it leads equally to problematic ahistorical forms of “historical readings”. With no ground upon which to explain the processes of formation and transformations of given discursive structures qua power/knowledge, Poststructuralism’s grasp of the historical specificity of a given historical period is significantly undermined. My contention here is that without problematising the relational character of power, constituted by and through the *practices* of living acting subjects, we end up with a metaphysical understanding of power relations and a disincarnated understanding of the specificities of world historical times. These pitfalls can be exemplified by Poststructuralism’s methods of analysis: deconstruction and genealogy.

The initial attempts by IR Poststructuralist pioneers to undermine mainstream discourses of IR have proceeded through the deconstructive method exposed in the first section of this paper. According to Bartelson, deconstruction endeavoured to denaturalise the foundations upon which such discourses rest (2001, pp. 160–61). Richard Ashley and Jim George have sought to disclose IR as power/knowledge and as a *discipline* that is a disciplinary field of practices (Ashley, 1987, 1988; Ashley & Walker, 1990; George, 1993, 1994; George & Campbell, 1990). Their main contention is that as a field of power/knowledge, IR has traditionally operated upon an economy of discourse and through disciplinary practices that have sought to maintain the “anarchy problematique” as its Archimedean point. As Ashley contends, the anarchy problematique is produced and reproduced through what he terms an “heroic practice”: a discourse of international politics which rests on the unproblematic “(...) dichotomy of *sovereignty* versus *anarchy*, where the former term is privileged as a higher reality, a regulative ideal, and the latter term is understood only in a derivative and negative way (...)” (Ashley, 1988, p. 230). As such, it functions on the basis of an unproblematic emphasis on the presence of state sovereignty as the gatekeeper of the good society against an unstable and problematic outside (Campbell, 1998, pp. 64–65; George, 1993). Its effectiveness as a discourse of truth rests upon a specific *practice of representation*, which magnifies, in highly abstract terms, the state as the main locus of power and its capacity as a rational agent to act in the interests of the nation (Ashley, 1996, p. 243; George, 1994, pp. 197–198). Such representation produces and reproduces normalising effects on the body politics (Campbell, 1998; George, 1994, p. 198). It primarily mobilises “domesticated subjects” around a higher ideal: the principle of sovereignty (Ashley, 1996, p. 238; Walker, 1990, p. 14). In representing the sovereign state as *the necessary* and *sole* repository of political identity and the *protector* of national interest, it plays a prominent disciplinary role in marginalising alternative sources of identity and in legitimising the use of violence against the alien “Other”, both inside and outside (Campbell, 1998, p. 65; Walker, 1990, p. 20, 1993, p. 160). Thus, it closes off capacities to imagine alternative forms of political community.

Whereas the representation of IR as a field of forces can indeed be a fruitful way to make sense of ways in which specific issues have played such a prominent significance relative to others⁵, we are soon confronted with a fundamental question: What are the historically specific conditions and social processes that have created a social space for human agents to develop this specific hegemonic system of representations? In other words, in what context do reified categories such as the state, sovereignty, territoriality and national interest can inform a positive system of explanation of past and present international human affairs (Campbell, 1998, p. 40; Walker, 1990, p. 6)? This brings us to the fundamental issue of social and historical change.

These questions have led Poststructuralism to develop their second most significant contribution in challenging the ahistorical and reified categories that inform the hegemonic discourses and practices of IR. It can be understood as a strategic move aiming at destabilising IR as a regime of truth centred on the “legitimate” figure of the Leviathan (Foucault, 2003; Neal, 2004, pp. 377–380)⁶. R.J.B. Walker and Jens Bartelson’s interventions can be singled out as the most comprehensive attempts to problematise state sovereignty as an evolving historical construct (Biersteker & Weber, 1996, p. 8)⁷. They both seek to highlight the historically specific nature and changing meanings of state sovereignty across time/space as a way to cut the “Leviathan’s head off” (Neal, 2004). One fundamental feature of their respective analysis is that they both follow the Foucaultian methodological imperative of developing “histories without subject” with its anti-foundationalist conception of power.

The principal charge levied by R.J.B. Walker against mainstream IR practitioners is that they take for granted the very foundation upon which their theoretical construct rest: state sovereignty (Walker, 1993, p. 8). In assuming what needs to be explained—the dichotomy sovereignty/anarchy and its corollary inside/outside—IR practitioners naturalise and reify historically specific institutional features of “Modern” inter-national relations (Walker, 1989, p. 169, 1990, 1993). Their ability to diffuse and disseminate these (ahistorical) representations rests upon their capacity to foster knowledge that sanitises the present from the embarrassing residues of the multiple historical processes of subjection and subordination constitutive of the present. Its foundation rests upon myths of origins functioning as forms of collective amnesia, which reinforces contemporary hierarchies of power within and across boundaries by abstracting them from the processes of their making (Walker, 1989; see also on the issue of *myth of origins* Campbell, 1998, p. 41; Teschke, 2002, 2003; Saurin, 2006). As Walker points out: “By identifying when interstate relations began, and providing a sharp contrast with what came before, these stories offer a powerful account of what interstate politics must be, given what it has always been since the presumed beginning” (1989, p. 170)⁸.

According to Walker, instead of treating sovereignty as a timeless feature of statehood, we should rather approach it in relation to historically specific discourses *that constitute* not only the way in which social beings think about the relationship between political authority and political identity, but before all their very social practices (1990, pp. 9–10). Indeed, the conceptions of citizenship and political identity as bounded territorially and institutionalised by state sovereignty are, as Walker rightly puts it, historically specific. However, state sovereignty is more than, as sometimes argued, a social institution formalising territorially bounded spatial fragmentation within the international system. Walker’s contention is that it must rather be understood as a historically specific resolution to the tensions between universality and particularity found in Western tradition of political discourses (1984, p. 186; 1993, p. 62; 2003, p. 269). The collapse of feudal system of authority based on hierarchical subordination of particularisms reproduced through a universalistic cosmology of Christendom gave way to a reorganisation of conceptions of political authority and the terms of individuality. As Walker contends: “(...) the principle of state sovereignty offers both a spatial and a temporal resolution to questions about what political community can be, given the priority of citizenship and particularity over all universalist claims to a common human identity” (1993, p. 62). In other words, the breakdown of premodern form of identity that rested upon hierarchical subordination, itself based on universal cosmology, paved the way to a new form of political identity resting upon the principle of spatial exclusion of particularisms (Walker, 1990, p. 10). Although the principle of state sovereignty is here pictured as a resolution to the tensions between two antagonistic principles—particularism and universalism—it remains an instable one, for territorially bounded political communities still contain plural and antagonistic individual (class) interests and identities which can hardly be reconciled with the idea of “general/national” interest. The principle of state sovereignty operates on the ground of a constant process of stabilisation of these tensions through discourses magnifying the universal role of the political state in its capacity to transcend (local–national) particularisms and, therefore, acts as the gatekeeper of national identity and interest.

The interesting aspect of Walker’s problematisation of the shift in the principle of political organisation, and the form of discourses it gives rise to, lies in his attempt at situating its historical context of emergence in Renaissance Europe. Interestingly, instead of being told that state sovereignty is either a timeless feature of statehood or one that was “created” from scratch by the ratification of the Westphalian peace treaties, Walker flirts with the idea of *historical process* in stressing the significance of the collapse of feudalism in the reorganisation of political life and forms of representation. However, the fundamental limit of his argumentation is to be found in the conspicuous lack of explanation of the *contradictory dynamics* that gave way to the collapse of the principle of hierarchical subordination found in feudalism and, more importantly, to the uneven and combined tempo of that process across Europe (see Rosenberg, 2000, p. 57). Moreover, it evacuates the fundamental issue of the uneven and combined colonial conquests that has shaped, through its theories and practices, the development of new forms of legitimation mainly articulated by Western philosophers in institutionalising the exclusionary social/legal principle in international law (Anghie, 2000, 2006, 2007). The

evolving “legal” thoughts developed by lawyers-philosophers to cope with the legal issues raised by colonial conquests can hardly, as Anghie illustrates, be understood in abstraction of the changing colonial practices between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Thus, state sovereignty cannot merely be thought as a philosophical resolution to the existential problem of the terms of individuality in political community. The form and content of these discourses must be problematised in light of the specific social context in which specific answers are given to particular problems.

Thus, after having identified the historical context of emergence of the “principle of sovereignty”—i.e. the contingency of this moment of epistemic rupture—Walker leaps into a discussion of the ways in which the tensions between universalism and particularism in the canon of Western political thought from Bodin to Weber have been rearticulated. Evacuated in his discussion are the quite varied and distinctive patterns of historical development to which the transformations of feudalism gave way. The idea of a “general shift” from premodernity to modernity, as Teschke argues, evacuates the varied historical processes in which power has been reorganised and institutionalised in line with what remained of the “pre-modern” sets of practices, institutions and symbolic discourses regarding the issues of rule and authority (2003). In other words, pointing to the moment of an historical rupture without explaining the *process* of its making, as much as the varied paths it opened for new social practices to emerge, is not a great departure from the use of the “Westphalian myth” to explain where and when IR Modernity took place. In both cases, we are left with a quite static picture of historical realities.

However, I would like to emphasise that what I consider to be the shortcomings of a “history with no subject” in the work of Walker does not pertain to his focus on Western political discourses per se, as a way to highlight the context-bound articulation of sovereignty and political individuality in thought since the Renaissance. After all, questions about political order are always posed in specific historical forms and the answers given to them are themselves always framed in the context of specific practical activities. This is the dimension that is precisely absent from Walker’s interpretation of political discourses as reflecting a so-called system-wide transformation in the articulation of political identity around the principle of sovereignty. Conspicuously absent remains a work of analysis of the specific forms of social contention and context-specific contradictory dynamics of power in the process of shaping what we refer to as the institution of state sovereignty. Such a shortcoming in an attempt to contextualise the conditions of emergence of Modern IR can be explained, I argue, by the assumptions and method at the heart of Poststructuralism theorising: an undifferentiated concept of power and the genealogical focus on episodic history as a way to stress discontinuity without explaining its causes, or rather explaining them on the basis of contingency and randomness in the constitution of power/knowledge.

Walker and more generally poststructuralist scholars have rightly stressed the fact that state forms as well as the principle of state sovereignty are both historically constituted organisations of political life. Moreover, they have rightly pointed out to the tensions that exist between the universal expression of the general interests of a political community embodied in the principle of state sovereignty with the plural character of interests and identities that exists within such communities. However, the tensions and contradictions of political communities are mainly expressed through discursive practices and tensions that stem from the solutions offered by political and philosophical discourses to the problems between particularity and universality in the organisations of political communities. Aware of the existing relations of power and domination in political communities, Poststructuralists however do not provide tools to investigate the complex issue of the historically constituted relations of social power, nor how such relations express themselves through discourses. We are left with a purely apolitical understanding of the significance and meanings of political and ethical solutions conveyed by philosophical thinkers to the so-called universal problems of human political organisations without a problematisation of the historically constituted meanings of those ideas and the material basis of these discourses about politics. In other words, we are left with the acknowledgement of the historical and spatiotemporal constitutions of state forms, of principles of political organisations such as sovereignty without situating these as the making of concrete

historical beings' practices. In fact, through their analysis, the state and/or political communities are implicitly treated as fully fledged subjects whose interests and identities they recognised as socially and historically constituted and contradictory.

The other example of the shortcomings of this method of enquiry is to be found in Jens Bartelson's *Genealogy of Sovereignty*. His work on sovereignty is far more ambitious than Walker's for he seeks to problematise the pivotal role of sovereignty within the different epistemes that have marked European history from the Middle Ages to the Modern era. Thus, it is not so much the novelty of sovereignty as a form of political individuality based on the principle of spatial exclusion that is emphasised. Rather, what is at stake is the exposition of the shifting meaning that sovereignty has had in different *Power/knowledge* "nexuses". As Bartelson explains:

The discourse on sovereignty is a discourse on the varying attributes and changing locations of power within political discourse, but power is not its essence or the source of its truth; rather, it is the discourse on sovereignty, as it takes place within different logical spaces and in different historical episodes, that tells us what power *is* within each, and how it should be interpreted, know and measured. Without a proper mode of knowledge to render it intelligible, sovereignty cannot exist, and loses its capacity to organise political reality through demarcation of inside from outside, of Same from Other. Without a proper form of sovereignty, knowledge loses its power to organise reality, and to constitute objects and fields of inquiry as well as criteria of validity and truth. (1995, pp. 83–84)

We should take note at this point that despite Bartelson's self-avowed debt to Foucault in his undertaking of a genealogy of sovereignty—that is the work of delineating *relations of power* that make at once possible and necessary, the positivity of systems of representation—the conspicuous absence of any reflections on those relations of power suggests that he has rather adopted the role of the archeologist of knowledge (that Foucault latter sought to overcome with genealogy). Indeed, as Bartelson explicitly states at the onset of his research, ontological primacy is given to texts over social context: "text ought to be treated as autonomous, and as something logically prior to the objects with which it deals and the author which it implicates; text explain the world, rather than conversely" (Bartelson, 1995, p. 8). As he further argues, context must drop out as a category explaining the meaning of words within discourses. Concurrently, as Jens Bartelson argues, one can also problematise sovereignty from a broader historical point of view by approaching it as a time-specific epistemic discursive paradigms. An historical understanding of discourses, therefore, involves only a mere description of discursive events devoid of all interpretation. Thus, contextualisation solely aims at questioning the very condition of existence of discourses as modes of utterance without linking it to the fundamental issue of the relations and forms of mechanisms of power.

As it becomes explicit, context for Bartelson refers to the concept of *logical space*. It points to the specific way in which discourses unfold in time and space, and are transformed through practices of being and knowing. Since what we perceive as part of our reality is first and foremost conditioned by our ability to apprehend it, the contextualisation of sovereignty must therefore proceed, according to him, from an analysis of the connections between evolving modes of knowing and structures of enunciation that shape human practices. This implies that transformations in discourses of sovereignty ought to be understood as processes by which the relationships between structures of knowledge, texts and discourse are redefined. This seems to be an impoverishment of Foucault's genealogical project for its conspicuous absence of a reflection of the relationship between power, knowledge and social institutions. Indeed, Foucault's painstaking attempt, in *Surveiller et Punir*, at explaining the rise of modern social sciences and disciplinary society from an analysis of the way in which forms of knowledge/power emerged from regionally discrete social institutions to form randomly a new mechanism of power (1975).

Notwithstanding the difficulties one can face in explaining the differences in the *social practices* of state sovereignty from such a vantage point, stands the problem of explaining what is specific and different about these discourses *across space*. To understand change in discourses of sovereignty as

moment of epistemic discontinuity in forms of both political knowledge and political discourse in, say, the Western tradition through time, foreclosing our ability to grasp the way in which actors situated in different social contexts and involved in specific forms of social struggles may have given different meanings to relatively similar forms of discourses. I would also argue that the concept of the epistemic paradigm of sovereignty might lead us to give too much weight to hegemonic discourses as exemplifying the discourses of one era—say, for example, Jean Bodin as exemplifying the shift to the Classical Age. This may tend to silence marginalised discourses—voices of lost political battles—that have sought to provide alternative way of thinking about political rule and authority in a context of acute social and political transformations, while however abiding by the same rules of utterance. Yet, since what is important in such a perspective is not an interpretation of the meaning of statements from a supra-historical standpoint, but rather an analysis of structures of utterance, it tends to foreclose our ability to grasp the specific nature of political discourses as well as their role in historically specific social struggles, in which human agents are the principal contenders. However, critically one may approach the transformations in discourses of sovereignty through the deconstruction of the “great texts” that have shaped Western political conceptions of rule and authority, one always risks to downplay the significance of the discourses developed by those who are ruled in legitimising the rightfulness of their struggles against their rulers.

5. Conclusion

One of the fundamental pitfalls of the discipline of IR writ large has been its incapacity to develop an adequate reflection on the relation between theoretical knowledge and historical practices. Whereas mainstream scholars have resisted en bloc attempts to mobilise history to substantiate abstract categories of analysis, and to think of the international dynamics as constituted by historically specific social practices, Poststructuralism has equally rejected this project for different reasons. As I have argued in this paper, despite its rallying call against stasis and for an account of the evolving relationships between power, knowledge and discourse as a way to stress discontinuity in time, Poststructuralists offer little ground upon which a reflection between theory and history can be developed. As I have pointed out, it is not sufficient to stress the changing meanings, and the changing hierarchical relations between signs within a given economy of discourse in order to take into account the socially constituted and the evolving practices of power in IR. It is necessary to explain the varying ways in which these meanings are constituted historically, and the ways in which they are mobilised in historically specific power relations between purposeful groups of acting subjects.

As I have argued in this paper, Poststructuralism’s ontology of power leaves no room to think of the differentiated capacities of subjects to purposefully act within historically specific structures of power to impose their will or resist the will of others. I have argued that because Poststructuralism conceptualises power as ubiquitous, it is unable to think about its changing historical forms, not the least to problematise it as the product of purposeful activities of living subjects. I have argued that this conceptualisation of power is not a great departure from the traditional way in which it has been conceptualised in the field of IR since it keeps wholly untouched its undifferentiated and timeless character. Lastly, the celebration of the “death of the subject” within Poststructuralist social theory has inescapably led to a theorisation of power/knowledge wherein human agency is rendered powerless to transform given structures of power and authority by its practical activities. Thus, its epistemology and ontology betrays a conservative normative bias.

As I have demonstrated in the third part of this paper, these epistemological and ontological pitfalls have led to problematic accounts of the specificities of the changing meanings of the concept of sovereignty within contingent economies of discourses. Without a ground upon which to explain the processes of formation and transformation of meanings within given economies of discourses, and more specifically of the varying meanings of concepts as mobilised differently by specific groups of acting subjects, Poststructuralism has reified not only discursive structures, but equally power/knowledge complexes. This has significant implications for the conception of historical movement, which Poststructuralism has reduced to the status of randomness and contingency. Without a proper anchorage to understand dynamics of change, directions and contradictions of given dynamics of

power, IR critical theory remains an impoverished project. Lastly, if as I have argued Foucault's genealogical turn had the positive (albeit limited) objective to relate discursive structures to varying institutional complexes so as to go beyond a merely discursive account of power relations, Poststructuralism's theorisation between evolving discursive and institutional structures remains wanting.

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Notes

1. In this paper, I use the term "Poststructuralism" and "Postmodernism" interchangeably since scholars working within this tradition have not made a clear distinction between the two. At the onset, it can be argued that poststructuralism and postmodernism share the same anti-foundationalist epistemological stance. If they both agree on the fundamental significance of discourses and meanings in the construction of "reality", Poststructuralism has tended to interrogate the relationships between systems of meanings and their institutionalisation in concrete social practices whereas Postmodernism has generally focused solely on the textual and discursive construction of "reality".
2. Regarding the difficulties of analysing and interpreting the social experiences, actions and beliefs of popular classes in *Ancien régime* societies, given the paucities of sources, and the facts that informations regarding popular classes are filtered through multiple forms of authority relations and relations of power involved in the judicial and bureaucratic procedures (see Sabean, 1984).
3. Indeed, Foucault's Panopticon focuses on the role of knowledge/power disciplinary regime on subjecting subject (prisoners) as objects of knowledge, and the self-subjugation of subjects as they experience the normative gaze of the panopticon (Foucault, 1977).
4. For example, Bartelson apprehends the state as "[...] a temporary expression of a ubiquitous will to govern" (Bartelson, 2001).
5. For example, critical security studies and gender analyses have stressed the way in which issues, such as power politics, balance of power, nuclear deterrence, etc., have systematically been privileged as the core of IR academic questioning, and the marginalisation of no less significant issues, such as underdevelopment, civil wars, forms of violence and insecurity which are often the by-product or, at least, related processes to state-led "security" policies.
6. As Foucault suggests, the analysis of power must be decentred and brought down to the level of subject-subject relations in order to problematise relations of power and domination concealed by discourses of sovereignty magnifying the legitimacy of the sovereign towards its subjects.
7. We can find a similar line of argument in Biersteker and Weber: "Whether considered as an institution, a discourse, a principle, a structure, or a context, sovereignty is 'about the social terms of individuality, not individual-

ity per se, and in that sense it is an historically contingent social [category] rather than an inherent quality of stateness" (Biersteker & Weber, 1996).

8. This is the reason why it has been argued that IR functions, in Foucault's terms, as a historico-political discourse. As Neal points out: "Historico-political discourse was not, as Foucault understands it, simply an argument over the facts of what happened, but a practice of valorizing certain interpretations of historical events or even myths to great political or indeed tactical effect" (Neal, 2004).

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