



## Postmodernism and IR: From Disparate Critiques to a Coherent Theory of Global Politics

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### **Abstract**

Postmodernism's contributions to International Relations (IR) theory have been extensive yet exceedingly disparate. Postmodernist IR is closely linked to other theories of IR which claim to be postpositivist, denouncing traditional IR for deceptive claims of neutrality and objectivity. It is not, however, a coherent theory such as constructivism, which offers a theory of change that can conjoin different constructivist accounts in IR. Rather, postmodernist IR has tended to concentrate on specialized issues, particularly in complex, but thoroughly valid, critiques of traditional IR. This essay argues that, due to this lack of unity, postmodernism has been weak as a theory of IR. Nevertheless, it is demonstrated how this weakness could be resolved through a bridging of different works, which allows for a theory of change to be developed. The purpose of the comparison with constructivism is to show how this theory has sacrificed its conception of change in its attempt at evading positivism, a problem that does not necessarily arise in postmodernist IR. In conclusion, it is argued that the weakness of postmodernism's contribution to IR could be reverted through the construction of a Foucaultian-inspired overarching postmodernist theory of global politics.

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<sup>1</sup> Felipe Krause Dornelles is currently doing a MPhil in Development Studies at the St. Anthony's College, University of Oxford. He obtained a BA in Politics with International Studies from the University of Warwick.

## Introduction

Postmodernist thought began to have a serious impact in the study of international relations (IR) following Der Derian and Shapiro's seminal volume, *International/Intertextual Relations; Postmodern Readings of World Politics*<sup>2</sup>. Instead of launching its argument with the traditional premises – the role of states, other unitary actors and the anarchy beyond – the focus of the book was concerned with a thorough reexamination of these elements. The term "postmodernism" refers generally<sup>i</sup> to a collection of philosophers including M. Foucault, J. Derrida and J.F. Lyotard, who were concerned with the deceptive essentialist discourses of the modern era and their consequences for the advancement of knowledge. When applied to IR, postmodernism is usually identified with the 'postpositivist' theories which also condemn mainstream IR for the uncritical nature of its assumptions. As such, postmodernism also has a significant ethical commitment, one which has been lost in traditional IR as a consequence of its selective borrowing from political theory. Given these new premises, postmodernism does not refer to itself as a new totalizing 'ism' in IR. Rather, in celebrating the diversity of voices, it refuses to offer an overarching theory such as that which constructivism, one of its main contemporary postpositivist rivals, provides. As a consequence of the scattered nature of studies in IR associated with postmodernism, they have been criticized for their lack of congruity and therefore credibility. This essay will argue that this is a weakness which, despite conventional understandings of postmodernist IR theory, could be resolved, thus allowing for a coherent analysis of global politics. Once the problem of producing a theory without succumbing to essentialist traps is surmounted, postmodernism can have much to offer towards a comprehensive theory of IR. Postmodernism should not be reduced to a theory which merely offers original critiques to traditional theories of IR. By stressing the notion that the creation and the understanding of knowledge are a consequence of processes of dominance and exclusionary practices, postmodernism can offer a sophisticated theory of change in world politics. A theory of change is one of the central elements in IR theory. Constructivism, which claims to have resolved the recent epistemological dilemma in IR, cannot do so without sacrificing its theory of change.

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<sup>2</sup> Der Derian and Shapiro, 1989.

## Postpositivism

A fundamental postmodernist critique of mainstream IR theory is that neorealists and neoliberals alike feel the need to create essentialist foundations for their theories, in fear of collapsing into 'the void of the relative, the irrational, the arbitrary, the nihilistic'<sup>3</sup> and therefore ascribe to positivist social science. Steve Smith argues that there are four main assumptions of positivism which have been essential to traditional IR scholarship: first, that there can be a Popperian 'unity of science' with the same basic ontological and epistemological assumptions<sup>ii</sup>; secondly, that ethics and morality are distinct from facts, which can, unlike the former two, be objectively analyzed; thirdly, that there are naturalistic laws in the social world which can also be objectively observed and, fourthly, that these laws and facts can be falsified by an empirical study, which is the "hallmark of the 'real' [positivist] inquiry"<sup>4</sup>. Ashley argues that the positivist influences in Waltz, for example, appear in his 'practice of spatialization'<sup>5</sup>. Waltz delimits a stage (the world) where unitary actors (states) interact according to objectively observable laws (the logic of power politics). The result is a pool table-like view of the world, which disregards the arbitrary and often unstable nature of national borders and the intersubjective manner in which the 'laws' are created and perceived. Morgenthau, the more classical realist, has an approach which assumes that it is possible for the IR scholar to be detached from the object of study, thus presenting a neutral and objectively verifiable study<sup>6</sup>. In their attempts to explain the interactions between states, the positivists have proposed international systems with laws and recurrences which emulate those that are discovered by natural scientists.

The problem with positivist epistemology is that it can only offer an extremely limited view of international politics. Relying solely on empirically observable 'facts' precludes the possibility of analyzing 'unobservables' such as cross-border structures that are socially created<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, the concept of causation is restricted to reductionist efforts into finding empirical correlations between events, without regard for socially constituted causes. What has been the most forceful postmodernist critique of positivist theories of IR, however, is that a value-free and objective social scientific project cannot be undertaken. Even Lapid, who is somewhat skeptical towards a post-positivist era in IR, agrees that a 'methodological pluralism' and an acknowledged

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<sup>3</sup> Neufeld, 1995; p.62

<sup>4</sup> Smith, 1996, p.16

<sup>5</sup> Ashley, 1989; p. 290

<sup>6</sup> George, 1994

<sup>7</sup> Smith, 1996; p.19

'perspectivism' are vital to "overcome U.S.-inspired nationalistic parochialism"<sup>8</sup>. The limitations of positivism have also been pointed out in the English School,<sup>9</sup> where a professedly subjectivist approach is nevertheless criticized for its disregard for temporal factors, reducing IR, as Wight states, to a 'realm of recurrence and repetition'<sup>10</sup>. Wight's analysis is guided by an objectivist approach similar to that of Morgenthau, in his *a priori* assumptions concerning the behavior of statesmen in their pursuit of "rational alternatives...[the testing of which] against actual facts and their consequences that gives meaning to the facts of international politics and makes a theory of politics possible"<sup>11</sup>. Although Morgenthau would not agree with Waltz's emphasis on structure, the works of both theorists, like those of the English realists, propagate universalistic and law-like conceptions of rationality.

Constructivism, which claims to have "seized the middle ground"<sup>12</sup> in IR by solving the paradox between scientific objectivism and what they see as complete anti-empiricist relativism in postmodernism, emphasizes the intersubjective nature of international politics. Constructivism's two principal foci are agents and their intersubjective creations in the international society: the norms and practices by which the game of international relations is played. These two basic understandings, constructivist theorists claim, constitute the central ontological and epistemological breaches with mainstream IR theories. By analyzing norms and practices in IR in terms of how they have been constructed as a result of human interpretations and interactions throughout history, constructivists accentuate the importance of the *meaning* actors give to circumstances in international relations. Wendt<sup>13</sup> gives the example of military power: "...Waltz's definition of structure cannot predict the content or dynamics of anarchy...US military power has a different significance for Canada than for Cuba, despite their similar 'structural' positions, just as British missiles have a different significance for the United States than do Soviet missiles." Thus Waltz, in Wendt's view, has fabricated a world in which factors and the agents causing them are closed off from each other, acting upon each other from positions and in ways predetermined by the 'nature of the system', like the previously mentioned billiard balls.

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<sup>8</sup> Lapid, 1989; p.246

<sup>9</sup> Brown, 1994

<sup>10</sup> Ibid; p. 213

<sup>11</sup> quoted from *Politics Among Nations*, in George, 1994; p. 93

<sup>12</sup> Adler, 1997

<sup>13</sup> Wendt, 1995; p. 135

Postmodernism has not failed to address these very important points. Writing on foreign policy and deterrence, Timothy Luke<sup>14</sup> describes the complex creation of *symbols* that is normally not accounted for in traditional foreign policy analyses. Like Wendt, Luke describes the importance of semiotical procedures in international politics, how the symbols could be perceived and how agents could react in response to their perceptions. His approach is not unlike the constructivist claim that "once the objects...are collectively generated, their reality is also predicated on the fact that they can have real consequences, both intended and unintended"<sup>15</sup>. Like postmodernists, constructivists refuse to accept *a priori* understandings of the material world, and demonstrate how its reality is dependent on intersubjective knowledge. Furthermore, as Wendt argues, the 'shared commitments to social norms' could drive agents to collectively engage in a certain international activity<sup>16</sup>. Postmodernism, however, develops this idea one step further. Rather than accepting the predominant social construction of symbols, it engages in their deconstruction and "shows how all meaning systems are precarious, self-defeating and only strive for closure without ever succeeding"<sup>17</sup>. Constructivism does not critically engage with the norms and practices it describes, thus objectifying them as static conditions not unlike the realist systemic laws.

George<sup>18</sup> also recognizes the importance of J. Vasquez's early critique of realism. Vasquez demonstrates how research conducted by different realists is undertaken with certain *a priori* presumptions, 'paradigms' (e.g. particular notions of power politics and national interests, states as main actors in international politics), that inevitably color their conclusions with very similar tints. Furthermore, mainstream scholars often work in institutions which have strong links with their governments (particularly in the US and the UK), making IR theory a highly political discipline. Vasquez is not a postmodernist but nevertheless his approach has been adopted by postmodernists, who adhere to Vasquez's critique in uncovering the misleading objectivism in traditional IR and one of its main premises, that of power politics, which ultimately caused the "[promotion of] certain kinds of behavior and often [led] to self-fulfilling prophecies"<sup>19</sup>. Thus traditional IR theories, rather than being explanations of

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<sup>14</sup> Luke, 1989

<sup>15</sup> Adler, 1997; p. 328

<sup>16</sup> Dunne, 1995; p. 380

<sup>17</sup> Waever, 1996

<sup>18</sup> George, 1994

<sup>19</sup> George, 1994; p.13

international relations, would be better defined as *political consequences* of world politics<sup>20</sup>.

These more philosophical concerns often give rise to a hollow exchange of rhetorical remarks. The critics of postmodernism claim that it suffers from what might be called 'epistemological hypochondria'<sup>21</sup>. This is probably a riposte to the postmodernist accusation of positivist theories of IR suffering from 'Cartesian anxiety'<sup>22</sup>. One interesting viewpoint from the part of the skeptics, however, is that postmodernism is "banging on an open door" when it challenges traditional theories of IR<sup>23</sup>. This implies that other disciplines and even other currents within IR itself have already demonstrated the necessity of addressing the problems of positivist epistemology. Indeed, it has been the focus of several other, so-called critical, theories of IR which stress that "there is...no such thing as a theory in itself, divorced from a standpoint in time and space"<sup>24</sup>. Critical theories, however, provide overly deterministic analyses concerned with objectified structural laws<sup>iii</sup>. Constructivism, another postpositivist theory, denies the existence of deterministic laws but does so by sacrificing its account of change in world politics. Postmodernist theories of IR put forward the view that although there is no one true political foundation for the study of international relations, the nature of change can be ascribed to the interaction of knowledge and power. Perhaps some postmodernist works in IR can be singled out for being redundant in the sense that they merely repeat what can be read in introductory philosophy texts, but this should not serve as an argument to undermine the overall strengths of postmodernism. Scholars associated with postmodernism might also be said to be "muddying the waters"<sup>25</sup> of IR in the sense that they lack communication with each other and ultimately produce a scattered collection of polemical accusations. This is a weakness which could be explained by the fact that it is a relatively new school of thought and with few adherents. Moreover, the overly prudent nature of postmodernist works in IR is also responsible for this unnecessary debility. Nevertheless, the adoption of ideas from postmodernist philosophy has provided new light to aspects of the discipline on which it has focused, particularly in the realm of how uncritical knowledge claims can be used to advancement of specific goals, such as a realist theory of IR.

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<sup>20</sup> Walker, 1993

<sup>21</sup> Halliday, 1996; p.320

<sup>22</sup> Campbell, 1996; Ashley 1989 and George, 1994

<sup>23</sup> Osterud, 1997

<sup>24</sup> Cox, 1996; p.87

<sup>25</sup> Osterud, 1997

## The Narratives of Heritage

The principal way in which the positivist-realist tradition uses uncritical knowledge claims to uphold its dominant position in the discipline is by building upon many *narratives*. The narrative, as proposed by Lyotard, is a way of legitimizing knowledge through history. According to Lyotard, the dominant form of narrative since the 19<sup>th</sup> century was born with German idealism, which posited that a fundamental truth underlies all knowledge and that the duty and right of humanity is to discover this 'Spirit', the teleological embodiment of the purpose of man<sup>26</sup>. Most importantly, its progress throughout history could be observed. This philosophy would soon come to be highly influential in Western universities. Postmodernists argue that realists in IR, as all Western scholars, thus adhered to a very similar method of legitimization of knowledge. The principal narrative of the realist tradition is that of their direct lineage from Thucydides to Machiavelli and then through Hobbes and other important political philosophers of the Enlightenment<sup>27</sup>. Central to the narrative is the artificial progressivism that is fabricated in order that realism might appear to be more well-founded. Postmodernism problematizes this narrative of lineage by exposing its less than obvious flaws. Scholars like Waltz, for example, who emphasize the essential nature of the international system in determining state actions, are particularly interested in hailing Thucydides as the first realist. However, as George argues, Thucydides "specifically rejects the notion of general (structural) laws capable of explaining international conflict"<sup>28</sup>. Rather, he is much more concerned with the intersubjective nature of decision-making. His analysis is also dissimilar to Morgenthau's view which, though emphasizing the importance of agents rather than structure, relies on an ahistorical and essentialist notion of power politics.

The realist narrative of lineage relies in great part on neglecting the historicity of classical texts. Thus Thucydides's accounts of security problems between the Greek *poleis* are equated with 20<sup>th</sup> century interstate issues, ignoring the intricacies of identity discernment that were intrinsic in classical Greece. The sociological principles of the formation of modern 20<sup>th</sup> century nations are more akin to Weber's writings – where, as Walker says, "geo-politics meets nihilism in the glorification of the state" – than to Thucydides's<sup>29</sup>. Thus the notions of difference, of borders, between modern nations and the negative space *outside* are social constructions that would appear much later, rendering Thucydides's accounts to a certain extent irrelevant to modern

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<sup>26</sup> Lyotard, 1997

<sup>27</sup> George, 1994

<sup>28</sup> George, 1994; p.193

<sup>29</sup> Walker, 1993; p.72

international affairs. This is not to say that the *poleis* of Thucydides were not concerned with maintaining their borders secure, but rather to suggest that state sovereignty, as it has been understood in the present state system, was not as unambiguous in classical Greece. Or, conversely, that Herodotus, with his own very elaborate analysis of Greek identity as opposed to the non-Greek, could just as much be a part of the realist legacy as Thucydides is. Nevertheless, the universalistic realist narrative – which, it should be noted, is most pertinent to relations between the European states and the USA in the Cold War context, given the essential differences in state formation on other continents – is capable of upholding itself through its own interpretation of the concept of the perilous *outside* in classical texts.

The one great overarching symbol of interest-driven power politics is Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Postmodernism is not aimed at invalidating Machiavelli's study – nor Thucydides's, for that matter – *per se*, but rather to propose a different reading of *The Prince* and also to compare it with other works by the Italian scholar in order to undermine modern realism's eternal wisdom and to expose the disputable nature of realism's claims about its long lasting tradition. Traditional theories of IR often seem to be "ahistorical apolog[ies] for the violence of the present"<sup>30</sup> and postmodernism, intent on being *more realistic than realism*, is aimed at finding alternatives to this overly fatalistic view. Walker shows how Machiavelli's politics, contrary to the conventional caricatured reading, is mostly concerned with his notion of ethics, what he calls *virtu*. He is interested in political communities and the virtues of good citizenship within the classical context of the *polis*. Machiavelli's *virtu* within the *polis*, however, has been excluded from the traditional readings, which only emphasize the militaristic, power-related aspect of politics. Realism has arbitrarily privileged the latter over the former, creating a false picture of Machiavelli as the "evil genius of realpolitik"<sup>31</sup>. This picture, along with that of Thucydides, comprises the basis for the realist narrative. They have provided the support for statements such as Gilpin's in his essay entitled, *The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism*, that "everything that the new realists find intriguing in the interaction of international economics and international politics can be found in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*"<sup>32</sup>. This statement is indeed quite ironic, for although on the one hand we have seen the significant discrepancies between the 'modern' and the 'classical' realists, on the other there is the suggestion that modern realism, having ascribed to its own understanding of classical realism, produces conclusions similar to those of the classical texts (thus

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<sup>30</sup> Walker, 1989; p.29

<sup>31</sup> Walker, 1989; p.38

Vasquez's *Power of Power Politics*). In this field of analysis therefore, postmodernism serves to make the traditional reliance on great texts appear 'strange' and to demonstrate how the narrative has actually been built upon a very particular understanding of these texts.

Derrida is especially interested in the notion of inclusion and exclusion within texts, and argues that what is known to be reality is but a particular configuration of texts<sup>iv</sup>. What realists have done with Thucydides and Machiavelli's texts, conferring prevalence to some aspects of their theories over others, Derrida has called *logocentrism*<sup>v</sup>. The logocentric procedure involves constructing dualities (inside/outside, *realpolitik/virtu*) and imposing a hierarchy between the two opposing themes, which subsequently becomes normalized as the truth. The most notable of postmodernism's attacks on logocentric narratives in traditional IR is the anarchy/sovereignty dichotomy. This is one of the central tenets of realism, since its concepts of security, either on the international structural scene or between rationally acting statesmen, are based primarily on the notion that outside the sovereign realm of the state lies a dangerous, anarchical – more in the chaotic and disorderly sense of the word than simply the absence of government – world in which there is no legitimate rule of law. As Ashley argues, Waltz's 'Cartesian spatialization' involves a doubly logocentric procedure in which the concept of the state is first given a 'human' quality of rational congruity – as opposed to the emotional, irrational and therefore inferior "man" – and then is placed in opposition to the equally inferior and unruly *outside*<sup>33</sup>. The very existence of state sovereignty, the assumption that states are firmly established unitary actors, is not justifiable in itself because it suggests that there is an inexorable consensus within each state, achieved either by democratic or authoritarian rule; this homogeneity, in turn, only acquires significance when placed in opposition to the heterogeneous and irresolvable disharmony of interests outside. Ashley argues that the sovereignty narrative can only exist when discordancies within states are overlooked, the effect of this being that a false account of international politics is given. The implications of Ashley's deconstruction of the logocentric opposition between anarchy and sovereignty are that, contrary to Waltz's theory, the mere condition of anarchy does not logically provoke states to resort to aggressive power play. Waltz fails to substantiate his link between power politics and the anarchical world because there *is no* clear differentiation between the anarchy of the inside and that of the outside. Thus postmodernism reveals how realist theories of IR cannot be deduced with Cartesian

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<sup>32</sup> quoted in George, 1994; p.194

<sup>33</sup> Ashley, 1989

precision, that what might at first appear to be logical is indeed a series of texts blended into narratives which are dependent upon exclusionary practices.

The postmodernist emphasis on textuality, however, has led critics to find postmodernism guilty on the charge of complete nihilistic relativism. By denying the possibility of an objective reality and by declaring any theory of IR a fabrication with no legitimate grounding, it seems to possess no mechanism with which to assert one theory over another. Vasquez, though sympathetic with some of the contributions of postmodernism, believes that ultimately postmodernism negates itself because if all reality is a social construction then clearly postmodernism is also a social construction – the consequence of this being that it cannot justify its own proposals<sup>34</sup>. For example, how can postmodernists claim that their deconstruction of the logocentric procedure is the correct one, and how can they defend the very thesis that logocentrism occurs? The postmodernist answer is that this kind of question only makes sense within a positivist-empiricist approach, which supposes that ultimately there is an objective method of falsifying theories. Postmodernism does not seek to prove with absolute certainty what it proposes, but rather to demonstrate both the *uncertainty* of absolutist knowledge claims and the harm they might bear to the discipline. Accusations that postmodernism promotes an “epistemological anarchy”<sup>35</sup> constitute a delegitimizing strategy which denies any view beyond the boundaries of the “scientific” approach, the definition of which is constructed by the positivists<sup>36</sup>. Furthermore, the charges of “nihilism” or that “anything goes” would be better directed towards the realists and the other non-critical theorists, for those are the ones who reject the ethics of political theory. Critics also accuse postmodernism of being anti-empirical<sup>37</sup>. This accusation is not accurate. What postmodernism denies, rather, is the simplistic notion that “the facts speak for themselves”, that the collection of data in the social sciences could be a value-free process<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> Vasquez, 1998 ;p. 224-225

<sup>35</sup> Lapid, 1989

<sup>36</sup> Smith, 1997

<sup>37</sup> Lapid, 1989

<sup>38</sup> Smith, 1997; p.333

## Constructivism, Postmodernism and Change in IR

Constructivism shares with neorealism both the logocentric construction of sovereign states and the assumption of their centrality in international affairs. This is perhaps one of the most significant legacies which have been adopted by constructivists from the English School<sup>39</sup>. It also attests to the fact that constructivism has not managed to escape the hold of the naturalistic social sciences<sup>40</sup>. The bracketing of 'agents' such as states, turning them into unitary actors, misleadingly objectifies them so that they possess clear 'national interests'. Although constructivism might possess an elaborate conception of the formulation of international norms and practices, identifying national interests and assuming the possibility of a 'center stage' that can only be occupied by a specific type of agent reflects the same epistemological notions as the neorealists: that the 'national interest' can be objectively observed at any given moment and an "economistic conception of power"<sup>41</sup>. Constructivists, therefore, assume that the interaction between the material (norms and rules, once they become 'reality') and the ideational (constant subjectivity) can be objectively analyzed even though the very knowledge of the material is based on subjective understandings.

Wendt's justification for his premise of the centrality of states is that they possess the only legitimate command of "organized violence" in international affairs<sup>42</sup>. Although he acknowledges that states have not always been successful as 'projects' in the past, he still argues that they are the "dominant form of subjectivity in...world politics"<sup>43</sup>. The weakness of his argument, however, is not only in his assumption that states are the most influential intersubjectively created institutions, but also to conclude from this that a theory of international politics should rest on analyses of state interactions because they are "still the primary medium through which the effects of other actors on the regulation of violence are channeled into the world system"<sup>44</sup>. Violence is, as often as not, projected into international relations independently from the existence of states, which are usually but segments of a war construct. Violence is thus understood by Wendt within the socially constructed dichotomy between the domestic and the international, whereas many more realms of identity, which are scattered between people(s) regardless of borders, can be observed<sup>45</sup>. Furthermore, analyzing

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<sup>39</sup> Dunne, 1995

<sup>40</sup> George, 1994

<sup>41</sup> Campbell, 1996; p. 18

<sup>42</sup> Wendt, 1999; p.8

<sup>43</sup> Wendt, 1999; p.9

<sup>44</sup> Wendt, 1999; p.9

<sup>45</sup> Campbell, 1998

international relations purely in the context of conflict, or presupposing the central importance of war leads to merely a partial assessment of international relations. Finally, the constructivist reluctant but nevertheless uncritical acceptance of state-centrism cannot account for the initial creation of modern states. Similarly, it does not account for different forms of unity: an African state plagued by religious and cultural grievances can hardly be equated with a more homogenous European one (which, paradoxically, could have much more intense transborder relations than the African one). Like traditional theories of IR, constructivism has fallen into the 'power of power politics' trap, making universal assumptions based on understandings of Western industrialized countries.

Constructivism's essentially static perception is a consequence of its lack of sensitivity to the effects of power. Having diminished the role of power in international politics, constructivist IR hardly transcends the realm of purely semiotical interpretation. Postmodernism seeks to revive the notion of power and reformulate it. Indeed, power is everywhere and its 'tentacles' cannot be escaped. Knowledge acts as power, silencing other accounts and knowledges. As Foucault stresses, in Richard Devetak's words, there is

a 'rule of immanence' [according to which] there is a general consistency (which cannot be reduced to identity) between modes of interpretation and operations of power. They are mutually supportive. The task [of the IR scholar, in this case] is to see how operations of power fit in with the wider social and political matrices of the modern world<sup>46</sup>.

All knowledge and the practice of systematization are therefore political; they are value-laden, as is the constructivist attempt at objectivity by ignoring power. It is in light of this Foucaultian approach that David Campbell calls for a coherent theory of global politics which is sensitive to new understandings of power and its intimate relationship with knowledge and the construction of intertextual narratives<sup>47</sup>. For Campbell, the focus of such a theory should be not only the intersubjective nature of politics but also the many facets of power and its diverse effects. A postmodernist approach would analyze how, as a consequence of what power relations, agents perceive and act upon each other and also what the consequences of their interactions

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<sup>46</sup> Devetak, 1996; p.182

<sup>47</sup> Campbell, 1996

might be for existing power relations. The traditional notion of boundaries should be discarded – especially in light of the new understandings of globalization and the globalization of risks which are ignorant of national boundaries – and the *construction* of boundaries, norms and practices – ‘transversal politics’<sup>48</sup>– should be analyzed instead. Constructivism’s view of norms, practices and boundaries is hollow because it cannot explain how some take primacy over others.

The most fundamental deficiency in constructivism, therefore, is that it does not provide a proper theory of change in international politics. The constructivists’ arguments about the ‘social construction of reality’ through intersubjectivity do possess a far more insightful approach to IR than positivist theories generally disclose. Indeed Koslowski’s and Kratochwil’s<sup>49</sup> engagement with traditional IR has provided a groundbreaking dissection of the events of the late eighties and early nineties, pointing to the inadequacy of the neorealist paradigm to account for the end of the Cold War. However, the article does not grasp the roots of the dynamics it is describing. It focuses its criticism of traditional IR theory on Waltz’s neorealism but ignores the English School tradition, the arguments of which were indeed very similar to those of constructivism<sup>50</sup>. Specifically, it does not explain why the revolutions in the Eastern bloc, which they argue were ultimately responsible for Gorbachev’s *perestroika* and the subsequent break up of the Soviet Union, were possible. Koslowski and Kratochwil argue, like Bull or Wight might have done, that “fundamental change of the international system occurs when actors, through their practices, change the rules and norms constitutive of international interaction”<sup>51</sup>. Postmodernism would not have trouble accepting this. However, what is not explained is the initial connection between the ‘actors’ and the ‘practices’ they engage in. It is indeed worriedly stated within the article itself that, “constructivism...is unable to deliver...a consistent and coherent reduction of action to some ultimate foundation that supposedly causes everything else”<sup>52</sup>. This ‘ultimate foundation’ is the crucial element which IR theories have so far attempted to uncover. But whereas the realists argue for finite and deterministic accounts based on ‘natural’ laws, the constructivists’ purely retrospective analysis hides behind the (transparent) wall of not being another ‘ism’.

What came before the revolutions ? Why were they initiated ? What, other than pure chance, permitted them to be successful ? Koslowski and Kratochwil emphasize the

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<sup>48</sup> Campbell, 1996

<sup>49</sup> Koslowski and Kratochwil, 1994

<sup>50</sup> Dunne, 1995

<sup>51</sup> Koslowski and Kratochwil, 1994; p.216

'unilateral' nature of the USSR's demise and the USA's unwillingness to "[take] advantage of Soviet weakness with an aggressive foreign policy and efforts to compound Soviet difficulties so as to make the Soviet Union as weak as possible"<sup>53</sup>. The assumption of the possibility of a unilateral break up is precisely where the constructivist explanation loses its strength. A unilateral break up implies an Eastern bloc entirely closed off from the rest of the world. Here, constructivism's intersubjectivity seems to be bounded by previously condemned divisions. A postmodernist approach to change in this period might account for the upheavals in Eastern Europe (and dissent within the USSR itself) by analyzing, for example, how liberal and democratic ideas from the Western bloc filtered into Eastern Europe and the USSR, upsetting the logocentric hold of Communism over Capitalism to produce a more diversified *Weltanschauung* in the East. This would explain not only the initial outbursts in Eastern Europe but also the *very willing* efforts of American and Western institutions to enforce the superiority of their ideologies in the East.

The deconstruction of the logocentric discourse, however, could not have been occasioned purely by the West. Rather, as Roland Bleiker<sup>54</sup> argues, it was the result of the marginal social forces in the East interacting with imported ideas, which were widely and powerfully disseminated by the international media, and reconstructing a discourse of their own. The successful dominant discourse then implanted itself and transformed the power/knowledge relations. The resultant political systems (power) are therefore directly dependent on the new ideas (knowledge). Conversely, the perseverance of the supremacy of those ideas are dependent on the political systems. None of this, however, is to be understood as how history necessarily had to happen. Postmodernism sees history as the *unteleological* consecution of discourses replacing each other in their positions of dominance. Furthermore, given that a discourse is only dominant in relation to the specific power/knowledge nexus in question, the hypothetical proposition that a new dominant political discourse has been established in Eastern Europe does not preclude the possibility of other discourses and marginal movements existing and interacting with one another. Neither can it be presumed that the dominant discourse is objectively verifiable at any given moment for it is constantly in flux. It is for these reasons, also, that constructivism cannot claim the 'middle ground' in IR theory, because this middle ground does not exist but for given *moments*. Such moments occur when a critical idea leaves the completely relativist space of ideas and deconstructs a dominant discourse. Once it has done so, it is a new

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*; p.225

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 1994; p.220

essentialism. Since this is constantly occurring and is aimed at different power/knowledge bonds, there can be said to exist an infinite number of 'middle grounds'. In this sense, the postmodernist "knowledgeable subject" (man) is "the site for the *interplay* between these dominations", as opposed to the Habermasian subject (as in critical theory) which can, through its rationality, propel the movement towards emancipation<sup>55</sup>.

Bleiker's study of the transversal politics occurring in Eastern Europe has no direct reference to the collapse of the USSR, however. It uses a Foucaultian epistemology similar to Bartelson's<sup>56</sup> in his 'genealogical' analysis which explains the evolution of the sovereignty discourse and thus the birth of the idea of the modern nation-state through relations of power that have been transformed over time. Neither scholar, though, makes the connections between their works and an overarching theory of change. The actual impact of postmodernist thought on IR, therefore, has been weak as it can only offer views on local struggles, such as Campbell's<sup>57</sup> work on the Bosnian conflict or Bleiker's more general but nevertheless localized view on popular movements. The excessive apprehensiveness of postmodernist scholars in IR is unjustified, however, since they have already solved the epistemological problem of essentialism by discarding positivism and have not, like the critical theorists, returned to systemic laws. A truly global abstract theory of IR would require that the connections between marginal struggles and the succession of discourses are made with major global events, such as the collapse of the USSR.

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<sup>54</sup> Bleiker, 2000

<sup>55</sup> Smith, 1997; p. 334

<sup>56</sup> Bartelson, 1995

<sup>57</sup> Campbell, 1998

## Conclusion

Like Habermasian critical theory and critical theory in general, postmodernism has reinserted the ethical element into IR. This is a logical repercussion of a theory which denies scientific objectivity as a misleading tactical and inevitably political maneuver. Emancipation, one of the central themes of the Enlightenment project which critics often claim postmodernism denounces, is indeed the backbone of postmodernist IR. Nevertheless, an overarching view in postmodernist IR theory has not yet been manifested. The postmodernist tools of deconstructive analysis have been widely used and yet there seems to be no interaction between the disparate resulting critiques. To the extent that it can be argued that there exists no coherent postmodernist theory in IR, therefore, postmodernist thought has not been able to produce a momentous contribution to the study of international relations. Its incongruity is a result of an 'anxiety' similar to that of the positivists; in this case, however, it is the fear of essentialism that prevents postmodernist IR from developing. Postmodernist IR scholars also borrow selectively from a range of philosophers and refuse to present themselves as a finite discourse. This openness, although in a sense a positive aspect – whereas mainstream IR theories claim to stand on objective grounds, sealed within boundaries of ahistorical and universal truth, postmodernist IR theories recognize strength in the diversity of theories – does not support the communication between postmodernist accounts in IR and renders it unstable, unlike constructivism, which seems to have more consistency. Based on the initial postpositivist assumptions and building upon a critical reflection of the construction of narratives, however, postmodernist IR could thrive on an intricate analysis of power/knowledge relations at the global level, providing a *post*structural theory of change in IR. The characteristics of such a theory might already exist. The emphasis would be on both the diverse critical marginal movements aimed at emancipation (but not a 'true' one) from the given power structure *and* the interrelations which ensue.

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<sup>i</sup> It is important to emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of postmodernism. Scholars, some of which call themselves 'poststructuralists', in various fields of study – sociology, political science, literature – have influenced postmodernism in IR. A mutual exchange of ideas is contributing in the construction of the postmodernist discourse

<sup>ii</sup> Ontology: 'what' or the 'things' we know to exist

Epistemology: 'how' we come to know that they exist

<sup>iii</sup> Notably the Gramscian-inspired work.

<sup>iv</sup> 'Texts' are not limited to their literal meaning, as in written works, but also included are cultural/institutional traditions.

<sup>v</sup> cf. J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*.