

Article – II

Postmodernism and IR Theory

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Abstract

IR Theory underwent tremendous contestation within itself since the end of the Cold War. Divergent voices from several theoretical vantage points began to register their strong presence in one of the most fertile areas of social inquiry. Under the influence of Post positivism conventional understanding of IR Theory dominated by Realism and Neorealism and Idealism and Neo liberal Institutionalism has undergone serious disciplinary scrutiny. Critical Theory, Postmodernism, Constructivism, Feminism, Postcolonialism and Environmentalism completely and radically transformed the agenda of IR Theory. This short essay is a modest attempt to explore the role Postmodernism played in the transformation of the theoretical understanding of IR. Before addressing the main issue at hand, it is in order to mention the main tenets of Positivist Philosophy which has left formative influence on the nature of human/cultural/social sciences at least since the Enlightenment against the background of which Postmodernism not only asserted itself after the Second World War but also designed its agenda to be implemented in the theoretical lore of human sciences in general and IR Theory in particular. Let me begin with the definition of Positivism.

Keywords- post modernism, positivism, discourse, nominalism

Understanding Positivism

Positivism or Empiricism can be defined as “an epistemological movement according to which (i) nothing around us can be known to be real unless its existence is revealed in or inferable from information, we gain directly in sense experience or in introspection of our subjective states, or later recall and (ii) genuine, intelligible differences in our claims about this world must express these knowable differences in experience. Either the truth of rival hypotheses must make a potential difference to experience, or their terms must be differentially definable in terms of experience.” (Reference Missing) Some of the main tenets of Positivist Philosophy are briefly discussed below.

Empiricism: The doctrine of Empiricism asserts that the source of all human knowledge lies in human experience. Empiricists like John Locke, Berkley and David Hume hold that all knowledge must be validated by the sense experience that enables us to know whatever we know. Knowledge has to be empirical and empirically verifiable. Therefore, any controversy, according to Empiricism, must be ended with the evidence of observation because when observation fails myths, dogmas and speculation come

into operation. Empiricists refute the Cartesian principle of innate ideas because, as pointed out by the empiricists, at the time of birth human mind happens to be 'tabula

rasa' on the virgin surface of which experience derived from human senses write the ideas. Since all propositions are posteriori in nature, they are empirically verifiable with absolute certainty.

Phenomenalism: According to this tenet of Positivism, 'phenomenon' and 'essence' are the same things and there is no difference between them. Positivism is in favour of the elimination of the old Greek Platonic distinction between essence and phenomenon and the latter being the manifestation of the former in the empirical realm. The classic distinction between the two propounded by Plato long ago is not acceptable to empiricists because it misleads the observer and hinders him from observing things that come into his experience. Empiricists are aware of the differences between cause and the consequence and affirm that there are some cases in which an event is the manifestation of some invisible cause. But just because it is so, it cannot be considered beyond the reach of empirically verifiable inquiry. What empiricists are against off is the tendency to render them occult entities that are, by definition, not susceptible to human observation and therefore do not deserve the status of knowledge.

Nominalism: Nominalism is a theory that puts forward the idea that 'universals' are not real. They are only names or words. Reality is inevitably limited to 'particulars.' Reason for this is simple. We can claim the existence of anything only when we experience it. Although we use some conceptual tools pertaining to ideal situations that are not there in the real world but they are our own creations which we develop as heuristic devices for the sake of convenience and explication. There is no reason to believe that since we use them, they must exist in an empirical world. It is this notion of Nominalism that is at the heart of the Positivist attack on Metaphysics that has been filled with abstract entities, general propositions and universals which is responsible for ascribing meaning to meaningless things. Whereas Nominalism asserts that the universality is the product of language and the real world is constituted by particulars.

Naturalism: This crucial tenet of Positivism holds that there is no fundamental difference between the methods that are used to acquire knowledge of the social phenomenon and those deployed to explain the reality of the natural world. The methodology that has been developed to study the natural phenomenon is equally useful for the explication of the social universe as well. There is an assumption underlying here. This assumption is one of Naturalism. It puts forward the idea of the fundamental unity of the social and natural world because both do display same or some kind of regularities. These regularities are very much susceptible to human observation and can be discovered by the adoption of the same kind of methods. These methods are not only independent of time and space but also equally applicable to explain natural and social regularities and discontinuities. The qualitative difference, therefore, that we find between different disciplines is merely a reflection of the development of a particular area of inquiry at a given point in time. Positivists are optimist about the progress of science, and they believe that progress in human knowledge will eliminate these differences one day.

Value Free Nature of Knowledge: This tenet of Positivism contains two aspects. Firstly, knowledge acquired by the Positivist logic of investigation is related and restricted to the empirical world only and it has to be verifiable in order to be knowledge. It is not in the competence of science to indulge itself in disputes pertaining to non-factual or normative issues. Secondly, knowledge obtained through the Positivist method of investigation is not prejudiced by the value preference of the researcher. Therefore, Positivist knowledge must be acceptable to everyone irrespective of his/her normative inclination.

There is an assumption underlying this tenet also. It is one of the separation of 'facts' and 'values.' As eloquently demonstrated by David Hume there is a logical distinction between facts and values. Due to this distinction factual and normative are two radically and indissolubly different things and they must be put into two different realms of human intellect. In order to be objective science must avoid normative questions because values are emotional responses of human beings and therefore beyond the sphere of Positivist method of investigation. It is the case because there is no method to observe values and norms objectively and empirically. It is this philosophy of Social Sciences that served the basis of the classical theories of IR such as Realism and Neorealism and Neo Liberal Institutionalism.

Postmodernism

As mentioned earlier that another mode of thinking began to emerge after the Second World War as a response to the radically different global social and political environment and began to question the dominance of Positivism in social sciences by the 1960s and 1970s. "A series of philosophical movements, most notably hermeneutics, ordinary language philosophy, post empiricist philosophy of science, and poststructuralism converged in assailing the dominant positivist orthodoxy" (Seidman and Wagner: 1992, p.1). Among these, poststructuralism posed a more serious challenge to Positivist knowledge because it questioned all the main tenets of Positivism and tried to replace them with their own. Following section details the areas in which Postmodernism left its indelible imprint in IR Theory.

J.F. Lyotard defines Postmodernism "as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences but that progress in turn presupposes it" (Lyotard: 1984, p. XXIV).

According to David Lyon, Postmodernism "refers to cultural and intellectual phenomena. One phenomenon is the forsaking of 'foundationalism', the view that science is built on a firm base of observable facts, in the philosophy of science. Beyond this, postmodernism questions all the key commitments of the Enlightenment. A second is the consequent collapse of hierarchies of knowledge, taste and opinion and the interest in the local rather than the universal. If science is soft, its authority is destroyed. A third is the exchange of the print book for the TV screen, the migration from word to image, from discourse to figure, or as the plastic wordsmith prefer, from logocentrism to iconocentrism" (David Lyon: 1994, p.6).

Postmodernism and Ontology: Practically all postmodernists do not believe in truth as a regulative ideal of intellectual inquiry because notion of truth is the product of modernity. By the virtue of being an Enlightenment value truth is not acceptable to postmodernists. Discovery of truth depends on reason, rationality, logic; all of them are an ignorable legacy of the modern project. Lyotard denies the possibility of truth. He is not ready to accept the credibility of any grand theory or metanarrative that seeks to explain all encompassing social reality. Baudrillard also rejects those theories that have been developed to discover truth. As noted by him “the secret of theory is, indeed, that truth doesn’t exist” (Baudrillard cited in Rosenau: 1992, p.77). Derrida is also in agreement with him and says that “there is no such thing as a truth in itself. But only a surfeit of it. Even if it should be for me, about me, truth is plural” (Derrida cited in Rosenau: 1992, p., 78). These thinkers believe that truth is the product of power games. It is manipulated and distorted by those who are at the top of the power hierarchy because truth serves their purpose. Michael Foucault adheres to this position as he sets the elimination of grand theories as the primary task of his oeuvre. “His aim is to attack grand system, grand theories and vital truths... For Foucault, to act as grand theorists is to commit the undignified folly of speaking for others – of prescribing to them the law of their being. It is to offer a new orthodoxy and thus a new tyranny” (Skinner: 1997, p., 68).

Postmodernism and Epistemology: Social scientists have traditionally emphasised the objectivity of inquiry. It has been assumed that the normative preferences of the researcher will not prejudice his research because values are highly personal and cannot be subjected to scrutiny. Postmodernists also think in the same way but go in a different direction. Some of them think that moral choices cannot be taken as normative preference because they are linguistic constructs. They, therefore, are not in favour of the elimination of values from the social sciences. Instead, they think that since all moral values are equal, no philosophical perspective can be privileged over other. Thus, their position is one of ethical relativism. Other Postmodernists assert that though there is the plurality of value system and all carry morally equal weight, it does not necessarily lead to ethical relativism. It is not unreasonable to prefer one value system over the other among the competing value systems. It increases human freedom to choose.

Postmodernism and Methodology: An anti-objectivist interpretation and deconstruction are the two main methodologies of Postmodernism. It is not always easy to differentiate them from one another because for some postmodernists deconstruction is also an interpretation. The only possible difference that can be made between the two is that deconstruction requires negative kind of critical faculties and interpretation needs a more positive point of view. Deconstruction has been the method of sceptics whereas affirmatives prefer interpretation.

Affirmative postmodernists believe that there is any number of possible interpretations of a given text because language has no fixed meaning and there is no permanent and unitary relationship between sign and signified. Therefore, interpretation of the texts depends on the number of meanings that can be ascribed to the words written in it. Since all meanings are equally legitimate, no interpretation of

the text is superior to other. Plausibility of the equal legitimacy of all possible interpretations of a given text has been heavily and rightly contested in social sciences.

The case of deconstruction is somewhat negative. It “involves demystifying a text, tearing it apart to reveal its internal, arbitrary hierarchies and its presumptions. It lays out the flaws and the latent metaphysical structure of the text. A deconstructive reading of a text seeks to discover its ambivalence, blindness, and logocentricity” (Rosenau: 1992, p., 120). The main task of deconstructionist is to highlight an argument which has been marginalized and the contradictions and inconsistencies of the text. According to Derrida, deconstructionist uses the text’s “own stratagems against it, producing a force of dislocation that spreads itself throughout the entire fissuring, financing it in every direction and thoroughly delimiting it” (Derrida cited in Rosenau: 1992, p., 120). Deconstructionists attempt to demonstrate what has not been included in the text intentionally or unintentionally. Their task is also to highlight the hidden meaning of the text. They seek to transform and redefine the text. They attack the hierarchies and dichotomies of good and bad and right and wrong. Their function is not to impose any meaning in the text but to expose the tension between different meanings of the text. It is through this complicated process a given text is deconstructed. I now come to the main theme of the article after this necessary background.

Postmodernism and IR Theory: Entry of Postmodernism in IR Theory can be comfortably and factually traced back to mid-1980s. The leading figure of Postmodernism in IR Theory was Richard Ashley whose earlier writings were more in the lines of Critical Theory. Only after the publication of **International/Intertextual Relations** in 1989 and the special issue of **International Studies Quarterly** in 1990 he shifted from Critical Theory to Postmodernism. As usually happens once Postmodernism entered IR Theory more and more scholars started taking keen interest in exploring IR Theory from Poststructuralist perspective. Consequently R.B.J. Walker, James Der Derrian, Michael Shapiro, Jim George and David Campbell were some of the most prominent scholars who seriously tried to redefine the agenda of IR Theory after the end of the Cold War.

According to Jim George and David Campbell, “Poststructuralism, by definition, is an emphatically political perspective. But it is one which refuses to privilege any partisan political line, for it equates such privileges with the grand universal claims for unity and truth in modern theory, and the dogma of the hermetically sealed tradition. It is in the act of not privileging that it offers emancipation and liberation” (George and Campbell: 1990, p., 281).

Postmodernists succeeded in shifting the analytical focus of the IR Theory from the traditional concerns of war and peace to the explanation of the global political phenomenon based on certain social and historical processes. They concentrated on the tensions between different discursive practices. They brought those issues on the agenda that have been indispensably linked with the “question of language and interpretation, knowledge/power nexus, the construction of modern ‘man’ and the question of how to effectively resist the imposition of power articulated via the privileged “logocentric” discourses of modern scientific rationality” (George and

Campbell: 1990, p., 281). Postmodernists did not want to replace Positivist theories with their own because doing so would have been the 'return of grand theory' in IR. They preferred theoretical heterogeneity to comprehend diverse reality of global political life. They wanted to exploit the potentials of inter-paradigm debate for social and political inquiry. By opposing the 'objectivity' of the Realism on the basis of which its scholars enjoyed the hegemony in the discipline they wanted to create a space for the marginalized and excluded so that their voices can also be heard in IR Theory. Postmodernist interpretation of three core concepts of IR is following.

Power: Power has been the central theme around which international politics has been rotating since ancient times. With the introduction of Critical Theory and Postmodernism in IR it became possible to take a fresh look at the whole notion and how it evolved over a period of several centuries. Postmodernists not only questioned the conventional realist notion of power based on material capabilities but also sought to enlarge it by highlighting the close connection between power and knowledge. An exposition of this crucial but until recently hidden relationship between power and knowledge is the single great contribution of Postmodernism to human sciences in general and IR in particular because nowhere power plays more important role than it does in world politics. Foucault was the central figure in this regard whose views on power constitute an integral part of his system of ideas.

Foucault begins his analysis with the traditional understanding of power. It is conventionally seen as the relationship between individuals in which one affects the behaviour of other/s. Power relationship is one "which acts upon a body or upon things; it forces, it bends, it breaks on the wheel, it destroys, or it closes the door on all possibilities." (Foucault in Skinner: 1997; 74) Therefore, we can speak of power relationship when a person or a group of persons is able to make other/s do what it otherwise would not do. Foucault comments further that "it is always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their capable of action...power is exercised only over free subjects; and only in so far as they are free." (Foucault in Skinner: 1997; 74)

It is clear that his understanding of power is consistent with the liberal notion of power. It is only when he begins his analysis of the knowledge-power relationship he departs from previous theories. Liberals believed that power hinders the growth of knowledge whereas Foucault espouses the view that power is an inevitable element in the production of truth. According to him, "Truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power...Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraints. And it induces the regular effects of power." (Foucault in Skinner:1997; 74) For him, it is not the case that human sciences have developed in isolation from the prevailing power relations of the society at a given point in time. Rather both evolved simultaneously and in profound interdependence on each other. He extends his acute insight further by suggesting that power relations are always unstable and reversible. If A might compel B to do something B can also force A to do another. What human sciences have done so far is that they have legitimized those power relations that were prevalent at the respective times of their origins by referring, or more bluntly, labelling them as knowledge, expertise and specialization. These power relations, consequently,

have become permanent and have been transformed into general pattern of domination. We generally tend to forget/ignore the fact that human sciences are product of the Modernity and its philosophy called Enlightenment. It required a rational order based on reason and rational human action so that smooth functioning of the state can be achieved. Human sciences acquired this social role through the growth and consolidation of thus produced knowledge which resulted in the expansion of state activity. For instance, the concept of society is the contribution of human sciences and in the name of the safety of the society state acquired several functions leading to the regulation of the various aspect of human life and activity. This is how state controls its population and depends on the knowledge claims of a particular discipline in the absence of which power relations would remain unstable and temporary.

This conceptualization of power has serious consequences for IR theory. Richard Ashley has shown how this close connection between power and knowledge operates in sovereignty problematic with which I will deal in the next section. It is sufficient to comment that once power is equated with knowledge the primacy of the realist notion of power defined in terms of military might immediately come under serious scrutiny giving way to the new significance to the ideational dimension of power. When this notion of power is applied to the discipline of IR one comes across various process through which realist understanding of power has hegemonized alternative ideas of power. Postmodernists also disclose how the realist notion of power has helped consolidate the dichotomy between what RBJ Walker calls Inside/Outside or Domestic/International in which former is the arena where power can be tamed, legalized and institutionalized and later is the domain where power play acquires free hand. By exposing an infusion of power and its subsequent operation into the divide of domestic and international Postmodernists have added a novel and somewhat troublesome dimension to the conceptualization of power.

Sovereignty: Sovereignty has been a major theme of Political Science, IR and International Law since very long time. Defined as freedom from external control sovereignty is seen as synonymous of state autonomy. It is surprising that despite being such an important concept it has not been subjected to systematic disciplinary inquiry. It is seen as a given principle on which international system is based. As pointed out by Martin Wight “international politics ...came into existence when medieval Christendom was dissolved and the modern sovereign state was born.” (Wight cited in Bartelson: 1995; 23) Hedley Bull also adheres to this position and comments that “the starting point of international relations is the existences of states, or independent political communities, each of which possesses a government and asserts sovereignty in relation to a particular portion of earth’s surface and a particular segment of the human population.” (Bull cited in Bartelson: 1995; 23)

Postmodernists question the privileged status of sovereignty in IR. They seek to situate the sovereignty issue in the larger discursive agenda of IR. According to Postmodernists sovereignty is a modern phenomenon which witnessed the emergence of Post Kantian man endowed with certain emancipatory potentials rooted in human reason. This notion of sovereign man has provided the rationale for the emergence of civil society in the domestic arena of the state. For IR it has created the problem of reconciling two

mutually contradictory aspirations of modernity: the practice of sovereignty in the domestic realm and maintenance of international peace and security at the international level. Richard Ashley was the first scholar with Postmodernist orientation who tried to deconstruct the concept of sovereignty as it is understood in IR. In a highly complicated argument, he contends that “modern statecraft is modern man-craft.” He convincingly demonstrates that the existence of sovereignty depends on certain epistemological positions and political practices. He unfolds the aforementioned contradiction by correctly highlighting that on the one hand modernity presumes the sovereign being of modern man for the existence of knowledge. It evokes the authority of a reasoning man “who knows that the order of this world is not God given, that man is the origin of all knowledge, that responsibility of supplying meaning to history resides with man himself and that, through reason, man may achieve total knowledge, total autonomy, and total power. Reasoning man- man who is at one with the public discourse of ‘reasonable humanity’- is the modern sovereign.” (Ashley: 1989; 264-265) The notion of modern knowledge is the product of Enlightenment. It assumes the foundations of reason in which modern man ground his knowledge because modernity discards all previous foundations of Christendom and God.

Modern politics, on the other hand, rests on its constitutive principle of state sovereignty. Ashley asserts that it is ironic that sovereignty like other logocentric theories is blind to its own historic specificity. It is deemed as a necessary evil which provides order that is a social essential for human contemplation. Thus, the sovereignty of a reasoning man is subordinated to the abstract notion of state sovereignty that seeks its legitimacy as the *Orderer* of the group of sovereign humans who on the basis of it forms a political community for the fulfilment of the aspirations promised by the scientific modernity. It is for this promising future of the modernity sovereign man was on the side of the Enlightenment at the time of its painful delivery from the pregnant Christendom without the unconditional support of whom this unprecedentedly ambitious human endeavour would have aborted in the womb of time. In other words, sovereignty of an individual and the sovereignty of the state go in opposite direction and its interface of which requires the subordination of the former by the later leading to the very negation of what modernity came into being for.

Anarchy: Anarchy is the other side of the coin in which first side belongs to sovereignty. It is defined in terms of the absence of central authority with the monopoly over the legitimate use of force at the international level. It is surprising that anarchy too remains an unexamined concept of IR given the fact that it has been a bedrock of the entire theoretical undertakings in the discipline. Kenneth Waltz implicates his neorealism in the conceptual parameters of anarchy which functions as an ordering principle of the international system.

Richard K. Ashley undertook the task of the critical examination of anarchy. He has done double reading of anarchy. First reading is similar to the conventional understanding of anarchy. “The greater the importance one attaches to international order, most might say, the greater the need to respect the anarchic quality of international life, the absence of central agency capable of effecting, administering, and enforcing rational global designs for order. How can there be governance in the absence

of government? How can order be constructed in the absence of an orderer? How can co-operation be facilitated under a condition of anarchy?" (Ashley: 1995, p, 94-95) He also presents anarchy in terms of the presence of multiple sovereign states with none capable of formulating laws with the force to execute them on others.

Ashley challenges the self-evident anarchic quality of international life in the second reading of the anarchy problematic. He questions the dichotomy between anarchy and sovereignty in which sovereignty is seen as a regulative force and anarchy is presented in terms of the absence of Leviathan in the international system. He shows that the practice of anarchy depends on certain assumptions regarding sovereign states. He proceeds further by contending that if the dichotomy between anarchy and sovereignty is to be tenable, the domestic realm of sovereign state must be one of the identity, homogeneity, order and progress ascertained by the legitimate force of the state and international sphere must be characterised by the heterogeneity and difference. Converse has been suggested by the Positivist scholars of IR. It is that the international system is homogenous because the notion of sovereignty is similarly and identically applicable to all of its constituent state units. It has been recognized by the international law as well and has gone deep down in the disciplinary architecture of IR. To understand anarchy in this way requires the conversion of features within the states into the essentials of between the states. Sovereign states are required to eliminate those elements of anarchy that are found within the territorial jurisdiction of states in order to make the distinction between sovereignty and anarchy valid. In order to make anarchy practicable in the international system states also need to suppress the internal dissent otherwise it would lead to the devaluation of anarchy in international life. In other and simpler words domestic realm is full of all sorts of difference in terms of political dissent and ethnic cleavage and international realm too is heterogenous in terms of huge power variation among the states of the world.

According to Ashley it leads to two particular effects. First effect demonstrates domestic realm as one of the stability, legitimacy and order and the second effect mirrors the international domain as dangerous, war-prone and anarchical. These two mutually constitutive effects depend on what he calls 'double exclusion'. They can function only when unitary presentation of sovereign identity of states can be exposed on the one hand and when this presentation can be shown as natural and uncontroversial on the other. Double reading of anarchy problematizes it by raising two questions. Firstly, what would result if there is the absence of sovereign states that are deemed ontologically primary? Secondly, what would happen if the 'rules' of anarchy were softened? To put it differently anarchy does not necessarily mean what it seems to imply and does not inevitably lead to power politics as suggested by the realist scholars.

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