

Poststructuralism's critical take on subjectivity makes it ask 'Who can speak within this discourse?' and 'How can the subject speak?' These questions also imply attention to those who cannot speak or who can speak only with limited authority and agency. One example of how discourses exclude and marginalize is that of statism in the UN system. Consider the United Nations General Assembly, which has 193 members, all of them states. Because Palestine is not recognized as a state, it is allowed access only as an observer. To the extent that a state-centric discourse rules world politics, **non-state actors** and **stateless** individuals have severe difficulties gaining a voice. Another example of the 'who can speak and how' is that of development discourse, where those who receive aid are constituted as less knowledgeable than the Western donors. As a consequence, the development subject is not qualified to say what kind of aid it wants, but should listen and learn.

As we explained in the presentation of the concept of discourse above, discourses are also material. The constitution of subjectivity happens, therefore, not only as a linguistic process, but as we engage our physical

surroundings. Poststructuralists such as Charlotte Epstein (2007) and Mark Salter (2006) have studied how biometric passports, visa restrictions, and the way entry is regulated at airports 'govern' who gains access, and how one should look and act. Material technologies—the incorporation of chips into passports, online applications for entry into a country, large data systems containing huge amounts of information—work together with discourses and policies to have effects on everyday life.

#### Key Points

- In keeping with the non-foundationalist ontology that poststructuralism adopts, there are no natural or objective identities, 'only' those that are produced in discourse.
- The terms 'subjectivities' or 'subject positions' underscore the fact that identity is not something that someone has, but a position that one is constructed as having.
- The relationship between identity and foreign policy is performative and mutually constitutive.
- Poststructuralism asks 'Who and how can the subject speak?' and 'What subjects are prevented from speaking?'

## Conclusion

This chapter has introduced you to the main thoughts and concepts of poststructuralism. Poststructuralism might be particularly good at drawing your attention to the fact that actors, entities, and 'things' we assume are given actually depend on how we construct them. Academic perspectives play an important role in the reproduction of particular visions of world politics: if we are told over and over again that the state is concerned only with its national interest, power politics, and **survival**, then we act according to that picture of the state. Poststructuralists also warn that there are no easy solutions to state sovereignty and that liberal calls for universal human rights, freedom, liberty, and democracy inevitably involve constructions of power and exclusions. While sympathetic to much in critical theory's account of the structures that produce global inequalities, poststructuralists are also sceptical that emancipation can tackle power and avoid the pitfalls of universalist discourse (see Ch. 9).

Poststructuralism might not offer grand solutions, but it has a critical impact on world politics. For one thing, deconstructions of policy discourses and the dominant **neo-neo** position force us to reconsider what basic ontological assumptions guide our way of

thinking. Moreover, poststructuralists have always been keen to point to the ways in which responsibility is constructed. More recently, poststructuralists including David Campbell, James Der Derian, and Cynthia Weber have turned to documentary film-making and photography exhibitions to engage a larger audience in different ways than through the academic text.

As all other theories of international relations, poststructuralism has of course also been the subject of criticism. Critics have held that poststructuralists use such dense philosophical vocabulary that it borders on the incomprehensible, or that once one cuts through the fancy language there is not all that much substance. Others argue that poststructuralism fails to account adequately for material processes, and hence for much of what actually happens 'outside of discourse'. Another line of critique centres on epistemological and methodological differences. Those, like most of the US mainstream, who hold that theories should make causal claims, simply do not accept poststructuralists' embrace of constitutive epistemologies. As in the case of the other theoretical perspectives in this book, we advise you to think critically about poststructuralism too.