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Chapter 11

Poststructuralism

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Reader's Guide

This chapter focuses on poststructuralism, one of the International Relations (IR) perspectives furthest away from the neo-realist and neo-liberal mainstream. Poststructuralists in IR draw on a larger body of philosophical texts known as poststructuralism. They argue that the state stands at the centre of world politics and that we should understand it as a particular form of political community. This challenges neo-realism's and neo-liberalism's conception of the state as a rational actor driven by self-help and relative or absolute gains. The mainstream's conception is, argues poststructuralism, ahistorical and it marginalizes non- and trans-state actors, stateless people, and those persecuted by 'their own' states. Poststructuralists hold that foreign policies always imply a particular representation of our and others' identities, and that identities have no fixed meaning, but are constituted in language.

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Introduction

Like **constructivism**, poststructuralism became part of International Relations (IR) in the 1980s (**see Ch. 10**). As constructivists, poststructuralists in IR were influenced by social and philosophical theory, which had played a major role in the humanities since the 1970s. Politically, the early and mid-1980s were dominated by the **second cold war**, and this context made an impact on poststructuralists, who feared that the two blocs would destroy each other in a nuclear **holocaust** (**see Ch. 3**). Poststructuralists held that the key to the **cold war** lay in the enemy constructions that both East and West promoted. The cold war is of course now long gone, but poststructuralism is still very much focused on **high politics** (themes high on the foreign policy agenda, such as war, security, and the military), and it maintains a concern with states' constructions of threats and enemies.

Poststructuralists bring a critical perspective to the study of world politics in two important respects. They are critical of the way that most states conduct their foreign policies and they are critical of how most IR theories tell us to study what states do. Poststructuralists disagree with **realism** (**see Ch. 6**) that we should see the state as a **self-help** actor or as a unit that stays the same through history. Rather, the state is a particular way of understanding **political community**—that is, who we can trust and who we feel we have something in common with (**see also Chs 25 and 32**). Likewise, if the **international system** is **anarchic**, it is because states and other actors reproduce this system, not because it is given once and for all. Poststructuralism wants us to take seriously what is excluded and marginalized by existing policies and theories, and it tells us to think critically about how we construct the world. To poststructuralists, there is no objective yardstick that we can use to define threats, dangers, enemies, or, say, underdevelopment. We need to investigate how constructions of the world, and the people and places that inhabit it, make particular polices seem natural and therefore legitimate. Poststructuralism tells us to take the state and **power** very seriously, but it does so in a manner that sets it aside from the other theories of world politics that you have encountered so far (**see Chs 6–10**).

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Studying the social world

Because poststructuralism adopts a critical attitude to world politics, it raises questions about **ontology** (what is in the world) and **epistemology** (how we can study the world). For students of world politics, the most important ontological questions concern the state. Is the state the only actor that really matters, or are non-state actors as—or more—important? Does the state that we know today act in essentially the same terms as those we see when we look back in time, or are the historical changes so important that we need specific theories for other times and places? Are states able to change their views of others from hostility and fear to collaboration? As you have learned from previous chapters, there has never been a consensus in IR on how to answer these ontological questions. Realists have held that the self-help state is the essential core and that the drive for power or security makes it impossible to move beyond the risk of war (**see Ch. 6**). Liberalists (**see Ch. 7**) have disagreed, arguing that states can build a more cooperative and peaceful system. Both realism and liberalism agree, though, that the state is the main building block.

Although ontological assumptions are absolutely central for how we think about the world, scholars and students often go about studying world politics without giving ontology much thought. That is because ontological assumptions come into view only when theories with different ontological assumptions clash. As long as one works within the same **paradigm**, there is no need to discuss one's basic assumptions, and energy can be devoted to more specific questions. For example, instead of discussing what it requires to be a state, one tests whether democratic states are more or less likely to form alliances than non-democratic ones. One of the strengths of poststructuralism has been to call attention to how much the ontological assumptions we make about the state actually matter for how we view the world and for the more specific explanations of world politics we come up with.

Poststructuralism also brings epistemology—that is, questions of knowledge—to the fore. As with ontology, the importance of epistemology is clearest when theories clash over which understanding should be adopted.

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As argued in **Chapter 8**, mainstream approaches adopt a positivist epistemology. They strive to find the causal relations that 'rule' world politics, working with dependent and independent variables. In the case of **democratic peace** theory, for example, this implies a research agenda where the impact of state-type (democratic/non-democratic) on foreign policy behaviour (going to war or not) can be tested (**see also Chs 7 and 15**). Poststructuralists, by contrast, embrace a post-positivist epistemology as they argue that the social world is so far removed from the hard sciences where causal epistemologies originate that we cannot understand world politics through causal cause–effect relationships. Compared to constructivists (**Ch. 10**), who adopt a concept of causality as structural pressure, poststructuralists hold that causality as such is inappropriate, not because there are no such things as **structures**, but because these structures are constituted through human action. Structures cannot therefore be independent variables (**see Box 11.1**). As you will see from the rest of this chapter, **constitutive theories** are still theories, not just descriptions or stories about the world, because they define theoretical concepts, explain how they hang together, and instruct us on how to use them in analysis of world politics. Thus it is not easier or less rigorous to develop non-causal, constitutive theories; it is just different.

The distinction between causal and non-causal theories is also captured by the distinction between **explanatory theories** and constitutive theories. As you read through the literature on world politics, you will encounter other labels that point to much the same things, with causal–constitutive, explanatory–constitutive, and **foundationalist–anti-foundationalist** being the most common ones. Foundationalists hold that we can say whether something is true or not if we examine the facts; anti-foundationalists, by contrast, hold that what counts as 'facts' and 'truth' differ from theory to theory, and that we cannot therefore find 'the' truth. Different IR theories take different views on whether we can and should agree on one set of facts, and thus on whether we should adopt a foundationalist position. Explanatory, positivist theories are usually foundationalist, and constitutive, non-positivist theories are usually anti-foundationalist. Because poststructuralism argues in favour of a constitutive, post-positivist, anti-foundationalist position, it is seen as one of the most alternative approaches in IR (**see Chs 12 and 17**).

Epistemology is also important at a more concrete level of analysis, in that your epistemology leads you to select different kinds of 'facts' and to treat them differently. To take the example of ethnic war, realist and liberal analysis looks for the factors that explain why ethnic wars occur. Here, the relevant facts are the number of ethnic wars, where and when they took place, and facts we hypothesize might explain them: for instance, forms of government or economic **capabilities**. Poststructuralism, by contrast, asks what calling something an 'ethnic war' implies for our understanding of the war and the policies that could be used to stop it. Here, the facts come from texts that document different actors' use of 'war labels'.

> **Box 11.1 Causal and constitutive theories—the example of piracy**
>
> Causal and constitutive theories produce different research questions and thus create different research agendas. Taking the example of contemporary piracy, a causal theory might ask: 'What explains the level of piracy in different African states? Is economic deprivation, military capabilities, or failed political structures the cause?' A constitutive theory asks instead: 'Which activities are being included when governments define piracy? And do such definitions constitute military measures as legitimate policy responses?'

> **Key Points**
>
> - Poststructuralists raise questions about ontology and epistemology.
> - Poststructuralism is critical of statism and of taking the anarchical system for granted.
> - Poststructuralism adopts a constitutive epistemology.
> - What count as facts depends on the ontological and epistemological assumptions a theory makes.

Poststructuralism as a political philosophy

As mentioned in the Introduction, IR poststructuralists bring philosophical ideas and concepts to the study of world politics. These can be quite complex and hard to explain, but let us begin with four concepts that have been particularly influential: discourse, deconstruction, genealogy, and intertextuality.

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Discourse

Poststructuralism holds that language is essential to how we make sense of the world. Language is social because we cannot make our thoughts understandable to others without a set of shared codes. This is captured by the concept of **discourse**, which the prominent French philosopher Michel Foucault defined as a linguistic system that orders statements and concepts. Politically, language is significant because politicians—and other actors relevant to world politics—must legitimate their foreign polices to audiences at home and abroad. The words we use to describe something are not neutral, and the choice of one term over another has political implications. To take an example, if what happens in Darfur, Sudan is described as 'a **genocide**', there is a strong moral pressure on the **international community** to 'do something', but not if what happens is described as '**tribal** warfare'.

As you can see from this example, poststructuralism understands language not as a neutral transmitter, but as producing meaning. Things do not have an objective meaning independently of how we constitute them in language. You may recall from **Chapter 10** that constructivists make a distinction between **social facts** and **brute facts**, but poststructuralists hold that even brute facts are socially constructed. This does not mean that things do not happen in the real world—for instance, if you fire an armed gun at someone they will get hurt—but it does mean that there is no given essence to 'a thing' or 'an event': is the shooting an accident, an attack, or divine retribution for something bad you did? What possible meanings can be assigned to a specific event thus depends on the discourses that are available. For example, we might attribute an illness like a heart attack to either our lifestyle (how we eat, live, drink, and exercise), or to our genes (which we cannot do much about), or to divine punishment. Using the concept of discourse, we can say that heart attacks are constituted differently within a 'lifestyle discourse', a 'genetic discourse', and a 'religious discourse'. Each discourse provides different views of the body, what can be done to prevent disease, and thus what policies of disease prevention should be adopted. Poststructuralists stress that discourses are not the same as ideas, and that materiality or 'the real world' is not abandoned (**see Box 11.2**). To take materiality seriously means, for example, that advances in health technologies can change the way that discourses construct those afflicted by heart attacks or other diseases such as cancer or HIV/AIDS.

Box 11.2 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe on the materiality of discourse

'The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has *nothing to do* with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of "natural phenomena" or "expressions of the wrath of God", depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence . . . We will affirm the *material* character of every discursive structure. To argue the opposite is to accept the very classical dichotomy between an objective field constituted outside of any discursive intervention, and a discourse consisting of the pure expression of thought.'

(Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 108)

Deconstruction

To see language as a set of codes means that words (or signs) make sense only in relation to other words. We cannot know what 'horse' means unless that word is connected to other words: 'animal', 'furry', 'hoofed', and 'fast'. Moreover, we know what something is only by comparing it to something it is not. A 'horse' is not 'human', 'feathered', 'legless', or 'slow'. To see language as connected signs underscores the structural side of poststructuralism (**see Box 11.3**).

What sets poststructuralism aside from structuralism (or more precisely structural linguistics) is that

Box 11.3 'Postmodernism' and 'poststructuralism'

'Poststructuralism does not mean "anti-structuralism", but a philosophical position that developed out of structuralism . . . , a position which in many ways shares more with structuralism than with its opponents.'

(Wæver 2002: 23)

Postmodernism refers to a historical period (usually after the Second World War), a direction in art, literature, and architecture, and is used to describe new empirical phenomena such as 'postmodern war' (**see Ch. 14**). Poststructuralism refers to a body of thought that is not confined to a specific historical period. Poststructuralism and postmodernism are often conflated by non-poststructuralists in International Relations (Campbell 2007: 211–12).

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poststructuralism sees sign structures as unstable because connections between words are never given once and for all. To take the 'horse', it might be 'an animal', but in many situations it is seen as more 'human' than 'real animals' such as 'pigs' or 'worms'. Its 'animalness' is itself unstable and given through other signs at a given time and place. This might at first seem quite far removed from world politics, but it tells us that the ways we describe events, places, peoples, and states are neither neutral nor given by the things themselves. For example, in 2002, when President George W. Bush spoke about an '**axis of evil**' threatening the Western world, this implied a radical difference between the USA and the countries (Iraq, Iran, and North Korea) that were part of this axis.

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida's theory of **deconstruction** adds that language is made up of dichotomies, for instance between the developed and the underdeveloped, the modern and the pre-modern, the civilized and the barbaric. These dichotomies are not 'neutral', because in each case one term is superior to the other. There is a clear hierarchy between the developed–modern–civilized on the one hand and the underdeveloped–pre-modern–barbaric on the other. Think, for example, of how Western politicians and media represented the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi as irrational—sometimes even crazy—and thus radically different from 'normal', Western heads of state. Deconstruction shows how such dichotomies make something, for instance how developed a country is, look like an objective description, although it is in fact a structured set of values. Poststructuralists disagree on whether one might describe deconstruction as a methodology (**see Box 11.4**), but agree that a central goal is to problematize dichotomies, show how they work, and thereby open up alternative ways to understand world politics.

Box 11.4 Views on poststructuralist methodology

Poststructuralists differ in their assessment of whether a poststructuralist methodology is possible and desirable.

Lene Hansen holds that 'Many of the methodological questions that poststructuralist discourse analysis confronts are those that face all academic work: what should be the focus of analysis?, how should a research design be built around it?, and how is a body of material and data selected that facilitates a qualitatively and quantitatively reliable answer? Poststructuralism's focus on discourses as articulated in written and spoken text calls in addition for particular attention to the methodology of reading (how are identities identified within foreign policy texts and how should the relationship between opposing discourses be studied?) and the methodology of textual selection (which forums and types of text should be chosen and how many should be included?)' (Hansen 2006: 2).

Others, including Rita Floyd, are more sceptical, holding that 'Derrida would have been fundamentally opposed to even the possibility' (Floyd 2007: 216).

Genealogy

Genealogy is another of Foucault's concepts, defined as a 'history of the present'. It starts from something contemporary, say climate change (**see also Ch. 22**), and asks two questions: what political practices have formed the present and which alternative understandings and discourses have been marginalized and often forgotten? A genealogy of climate change might start by asking who are allowed to speak and make decisions at events such as the 2011 United Nations Climate Change Conference held in Durban. Then it asks what constructions of 'the climate' and '**global responsibility**' are dominant, and how these constructions relate to past discourses. By looking into the past we see alternative ways to conceptualize humans' relationship with 'the climate' and gain an understanding of the discursive and material structures that underpin the present.

The concept of power

The concepts of genealogy and discourse point us towards Foucault's conception of power. Power, to Foucault, is 'productive': it comes about when discourses constitute particular subject positions as the 'natural' ones. 'Actors' therefore do not exist outside discourse; they are produced through discourse and need to be recognized by others. We can see such actor-recognition processes unfold when oppositional movements challenge existing governments, as in the cases of the Arab Spring, where the question of who represents 'the people' becomes crucial. When states and **institutions** manage to establish themselves as having the knowledge to govern a particular issue, this is also an instance of power. Knowledge is not opposed to power—as in the classical phrase 'speaking truth to power'—but is integral to power itself. As a concrete example, take the way Western scholars have 'gained knowledge' about non-Western peoples by describing them as inferior, backward,

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underdeveloped, and sometimes threatening. This takes for granted that a foreign **identity** exists and that it can be studied (**see also Ch. 12**). More broadly, to speak from a position of knowledge is to exercise authority over a given issue. Poststructuralists in IR have also picked up one of Foucault's more specific conceptualizations of power, namely that of 'biopower'. Biopower works at two levels: at the individual level we are told to discipline and control our bodies, and at the collective level we find that governments and other institutions seek to manage whole populations. A good example of **biopolitics** is that of population control, where states have promoted such 'body-disciplining' practices as abstinence before marriage and use of contraceptives in an attempt to reduce the number of births or prevent particular groups of women from getting pregnant. Practices targeted at the individual are built around the idea that there is 'a' population that can be studied and steered in a particular direction (**see Case Study 1** for a further discussion of how the concepts of discourse and biopolitics can be used to understand global politics on HIV/AIDS). It is clear that poststructuralism's concept of power goes beyond that of realism, which defines power as material capabilities (**see Ch. 6**). Compared to constructivism, which also includes knowledge and identities (**see Ch. 10**), poststructuralism looks more critically at how actors get to be constituted as actors in the first place.

Intertextuality

The theory on **intertextuality** was developed by the semiotic theorist Julia Kristeva. It argues that we can understand the social world as comprising texts. This is because texts form an 'intertext'—that is, they are connected to texts that came before them. In some situations this is self-evident. Take, for example, declarations made by international institutions like the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization** (NATO), the **European Union** (EU), and the United Nations, which quote previous declarations and perhaps statements by member countries. But intertextual relations are also made in more abstract ways. For example, to say

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Case Study 1 Discourses on HIV/AIDS

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HIV/AIDS has been situated right at the heart of discussions of **globalization** since the disease was discovered in the 1980s (**see also Box 30.3**). Some states have tried to protect themselves from exposure to the virus by excluding people with HIV/AIDS from entering and staying. The USA, for example, adopted a travel ban in 1987 which was in place until January 2010. The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) has fought such policies because, in the words of Executive Director Michel Sidibé, 'Such discrimination has no place in today's highly mobile world' (UNAIDS 2010).

From a poststructuralist perspective, policies on HIV/AIDS are not simply seeking to solve a material problem—HIV/AIDS—but constitute the disease and those who are affected by it in specific ways. The policies that ban people with HIV/AIDS from entering a country invoke a discourse of danger: those who enter are a risk to those who already live there, that is, the 'home population' (see also Epstein 2007). But why are those with HIV/AIDS a danger? Obviously, there are those who might be dangerous because they act irresponsibly by having unprotected sex or sharing needles, but even those who do not are also banned from entering. Adopting the concept of biopolitics, we might say that the danger stems from the 'infected' body itself, that a body has 'a life'—and an untrustworthiness—independently of how disciplined the behaviour of its 'owner' may be (Elbe 2009). And if the individual cannot discipline 'its' body, states are justified in 'controlling' a whole group of 'infected people'. Here we see that biopolitics and a traditional state-centric discourse come together to legitimize the view that states have the right to close their borders to individuals from other states. The opposing discourse, that of 'rights of travel', implies a very different representation of those living with the virus. Rather than being threats to 'home populations', they have the same rights as other human beings, including those of travel. By focusing on human rights rather than on dangers, this discourse adopts a normative position that breaks with a state-centric way of thinking (**see Chs 6, 13, and 31**).

Theory applied

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that 'the Balkans' is filled with 'ancient hatred' is to draw on a body of texts that constitutes 'the Balkans' as pre-modern and barbaric. Intertextuality might also involve images, or interpreting events that are not exclusively written or spoken. For instance, when presidents meet in front of the television cameras expressing their commitment to solving the financial crisis, we look not just at what is said but at what having such a meeting signifies. The presidential press conference is, in other words, an important 'sign' within the larger text that defines **diplomacy**. Intertextuality also implies that certain things are taken for granted because previous texts have made the point so many times that there is no need to state it again. If you read through NATO documents from the cold war, you will find that they might not necessarily mention the Soviet Union all that much. That is because everyone at the time knew that NATO's main purpose was to deter the Soviet Union from attacking members of NATO. Working with intertextuality, we should therefore ask ourselves what a given text does not mention, either because it is taken for granted or because it is too dangerous to say.

At the same time as intertextuality points to the way in which texts always 'quote' past texts, it also holds that individual texts are unique. No text is a complete reproduction of an earlier one. Even when one text incorporates another by quoting it in full, the new context modifies the older text. This is of significance to the study of world politics because it underscores the fact that meaning changes when texts are quoted by other texts. Take the Muhammad cartoons that were printed by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in September 2005. They have now been reproduced by many other newspapers and on the Internet, and many different readings have been offered. If you look at the cartoons today, you cannot therefore 'read' them in the same way as you could when they were first published.

Popular culture

The argument that we should understand world politics through the lens of intertextuality has led poststructuralists to look at forms of text that are not normally discussed by IR theories. James Der Derian has studied the intertext of popular spy novels, journalism, and academic analysis (Der Derian 1992). Others, including Michael J. Shapiro (1988, 1997) and Cynthia Weber (2006), analyse television shows, film, and photography. Poststructuralists hold that there are several reasons why we should pay attention to **popular culture**. For one thing, states actually take popular culture seriously, even if it is 'just fiction'. In 2006, the Kazakh government launched an advertising campaign in the USA because they wanted to correct the picture of Kazakhstan given in the movie *Borat*, and in 2010 a Turkish television drama's depiction of Israeli security forces led the Israeli Foreign Ministry to protest to the Turkish ambassador. Another reason why we should take popular culture seriously—and why states do so too—is that film, television, music, and video are watched and listened to by many people across the world. As the world has become increasingly globalized, popular culture has spread quickly from one place to another and new media technologies, such as cellphones, have fundamentally changed who can produce the 'texts' of world politics. Think, for example, of soldiers' videos of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that are uploaded to the Internet, and the photos from Abu Ghraib. Finally, popular culture might provide us with complex, critical, and thought-provoking visions of world politics. One example is the films made about the Vietnam War such as *The Deer Hunter* and *First Blood* (the first of the Rambo movies) that helped generate debate over the war itself and the traumas faced by returning soldiers. Another is the widely acclaimed graphic novel *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi which shows what it was like growing up in Iran during and after the revolution in 1979.

Key Points

- Four concepts from poststructuralist philosophy have been used to produce new knowledge about world politics: discourse, deconstruction, genealogy, and intertextuality.
- To look at world politics as discourse is to study the linguistic structures through which materiality is given meaning.
- Deconstruction argues that language is a system of unstable dichotomies where one term is valued as superior.
- Genealogy asks which political practices have formed the present and which alternative understandings and discourses have been marginalized and forgotten.
- Intertextuality holds that we can see world politics as made up of texts, and that all texts refer to other texts yet each is unique.

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Deconstructing state sovereignty

Poststructuralists use the four key concepts (discourse, deconstruction, genealogy, and intertextuality) to answer the 'big questions' of IR: What is the status of the state? Is the international system doomed to recurring conflicts and power politics, as realism holds? Or is it possible to move towards more cooperative arrangements, as argued by liberalism?

The inside–outside distinction

Poststructuralists agree with realists that the state is absolutely central to world politics. Yet, in contrast to realists, who take the state for granted, poststructuralists deconstruct the role the state plays in world politics as well as in the academic field of IR. Arguing that the state is not 'a unit' that has the same essence across time and space, R. B. J. Walker (1990) holds that the state is a particular way to organize political community (**see also Ch. 32**). The question of political community is of utmost importance to national as well as international politics because it tells us why the forms of governance that are in place are legitimate, who we can trust, who we have something in common with, and who we should help if they are under attack, suffering, or hungry (**see also Ch. 25**). The significance of political community is perhaps most striking when states fall apart and separate into new states, such as happened with the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia in the 1990s and more recently with Sudan. Such processes involve reconstructions of who 'we' are and an idea of how we differ from those who were part of the old state.

The sovereign, territorial state has an unrivalled position as the political community, but it only came to have this position as a result of a series of events and processes that began with the **Treaties of Westphalia** (**see Ch. 2**). Walker tells us that we can learn something important about this transition from the medieval to the modern state system because this shows us two different ways of organizing political community. In the medieval world there were so-called overlapping authorities. This means that religious and politi-

each other. In terms of how we think about relations between people, the medieval world worked according to what Walker calls a principle of 'hierarchical subordination'. Hierarchical subordination assigns each individual to a particular position in society. At the top was the Emperor and the Pope, next came the bishops and the kings, then the priests and local nobility, and at the bottom were those who owned nothing and who had no rights. The Treaties of Westphalia began a process whereby people became more closely linked to states, and after the French Revolution each citizen had the same status. This did not mean that all individuals were citizens or that all citizens had the same amount of money, wealth, education, or property, but there was no longer anything in a person's nature, as with the principle of hierarchical subordination, that made him or her inherently superior or inferior.

State sovereignty implies, in Walker's words, a division of the world into an 'inside' the state (where there is **order**, trust, **loyalty**, and progress) and an 'outside' (where there is conflict, suspicion, self-help, and anarchy). Walker then uses the principle of deconstruction to show that the national–international distinction is not simply an objective account of how the 'real world works'. The distinction is not maintained by something outside itself, but by the way in which the two sides of the dichotomy reinforce each other: we know the international only by what it is not (national), and likewise the national only by what it is not (the international). The world 'inside' states is not only different from the international realm 'outside'; the two are constituted as each other's opposition. The inside–outside dichotomy is stabilized by a long series of other dichotomies, including those of peace and war, reason and power, and order and anarchy (**see Fig. 11.1**).

Poststructuralists have shown how the inside–outside dichotomy, which like all dichotomies is inherently unstable, is held in place by being reproduced again and again. The negotiations between the EU and Greece over how to handle the latter's debt crisis show, for example, how state sovereignty is challenged by the

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Inside–the state	⟷	**Outside–the international**
Order	⟷	Anarchy
Community	⟷	Difference
Reason	⟷	Power
Trust	⟷	Suspicion
Progress	⟷	Repetition
Cooperation	⟷	Self-help
Law	⟷	Capabilities
Peace	⟷	War

Figure 11.1 The inside–outside dichotomy and its stabilizing oppositions

of the inside–outside dichotomy. States reproduce state sovereignty, but so do academic texts. Richard K. Ashley points, for example, to realism's 'double move' (Ashley 1987: 413–18). The first move is to assume that we can only understand '**community**' in one way, and that is the one we know from domestic politics. When we think of 'international community', it is built on what we know from the state. The second move consists of arguing that such a community is possible only within the territorial state. The harmony, reason, and **justice** that are possible within states cannot be extended to the international sphere, as this is fraught with anarchy, repetition, and power politics. The realist scholar must therefore educate governments not to incorporate ethics and justice in their foreign policies. In 2003, a group of prominent activists were opposed to a war against Iraq. Their opposition was based on an assessment of the American **national interest**, not moral concerns.

The strength of state sovereignty

We should note that when poststructuralists write about the inside–outside dichotomy, they are not making the claim that the world works neatly that way. There are

intervene in other states that are prosecuting their 'own' citizens. Or think of countries where children of refused asylum seekers are deported with their parents, even if they are born in the country where asylum was sought.

One of the strengths of poststructuralism is that it points to how state sovereignty is often both questioned and supported. The attacks of **9/11** and the **war on terror** undermined state sovereignty at the same time as Western states saw them through the lens of state-based territoriality: 'American soil' was attacked and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan was held responsible for what happened on 'its' **territory**. Or consider Somali pirates, who 'work' in a way that escapes the control of the Somali state. In response, Western states have tried to bring back order by sending NATO warships to patrol the waters off the Somali coast. As the pirates transgress state sovereignty, we also see states respond by protecting 'their' ships from being attacked. Before we declare the inside–outside distinction dead and gone, we should therefore take its flexibility and resilience into account (**see also Case Study 2**).

Universal alternatives

Poststructuralists warn that although our deconstruction of state sovereignty makes it look less like an objective fact, it is not easy to transcend; nor can it be replaced by a '**global community**'. As R. B. J. Walker puts it, 'The state is a political category in a way that the world, or the globe, or the planet, or humanity is not' (Walker 1997: 72). The way to engage a dichotomy is not simply to reverse the hierarchy between the terms (that is, replace 'the state' with 'the global'), but to rethink all the complex dichotomies around which it revolves. If we leave the state in favour of the global, a crucial question becomes how we prevent a return to the model we know from the medieval world—that is, one of a global community where individuals are ranked and given different value. Poststructuralists hold that claims to 'global', 'universal' solutions always imply that something else is different and 'particular'. And that which

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Case Study 2 Territoriality, identity, and sex trafficking

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NGOs, the media, states, and international institutions such as the EU are giving sex trafficking increasing attention. 'Trafficking' defines a movement across state borders, and 'trafficked' women are taken from one country to another, not moved within a state. They cross territorial boundaries illegally, either because they are smuggled into a country, or because they enter under false pretences (on tourist visas or to do domestic work, for instance). Trafficking implies a transgression of the territorial boundary, but trafficked women also have a political visibility that women who are doing the same kind of 'work' within a country do not get.

Trafficked women are defined as victims. The *Report of the Experts Group on Trafficking in Human Beings*, published by the European Commission in 2004, states:

> The core elements of trafficking, as defined in the [UN] Protocol, are coercion, abuse and deceit. The definition covers all forms of trafficking into sexual exploitation, slavery, forced labour and servitude. Furthermore, it makes a clear distinction between trafficking and prostitution as such . . . , leaving it to individual States how to address prostitution in their respective domestic laws.

This quote shows how a political boundary is drawn between what states should cooperate on (namely trafficking) and what they should not (prostitution). It also shows that the trafficked woman is one who has been 'coerced' and 'deceived', not someone who 'knows' and 'acts'. Poststructuralist feminists point out that the dichotomies between 'deception' and 'knowledge' and between 'victim' and 'agent' are problematic. Many trafficked women describe themselves in ways that do not fit these dichotomies: they have some knowledge and are not forced. But 'admitting' this puts them into the category of 'sex workers' and 'illegal immigrants' who are not worthy of the same kind of protection as 'the victims' (Aradau 2008 and Penttinen 2008).

Theory applied

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2000s (**see also Ch. 7**). In this discourse, 'fighting **terrorism**' took place to defend 'freedom', 'liberty', 'security', and 'democracy' (**see Ch. 23**). Although this might at first sound unproblematic—even appealing—the problem is that this set of universally good categories is spoken and defined not by a truly global voice, but by a particular set of states. The good 'universal' categories were aimed at the...

sensitive and concerned with the big political and normative questions of world politics. **Neo-realism**, on the other hand, is criticized for its ahistorical view of the state, its reification of the international structure, and its positivist epistemology.

Key Points

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Identity and foreign policy

Poststructuralists have also moved from the general study of state sovereignty to ask how we should understand foreign policy. In traditional foreign policy analysis, foreign policies are designed to defend the state (security policies), help it financially (economic policies), or make it do good in the world (development policies). Poststructuralists hold, by contrast, that there is no stable object—the state—from which foreign policies are drawn, but that foreign policies rely on and produce particular understandings of the state. Foreign policies constitute the identity of the Self through the construction of threats, dangers, and challenges—that is, its Other(s). As Michael J. Shapiro puts it, this means that the politics of representation is absolutely crucial. How we represent others affects the representation of our selves, and this representation is decisive for which foreign policies we choose (Shapiro 1988). For example, debates within the EU over whether Turkey should be accepted as a new member centre on whether Turkey is a European country and whether it is possible to be European and Muslim at the same time. The way in which EU countries answer these questions has implications not only for the construction of Turkey's identity, but for that of **Europe**'s. Foreign policies are thus not protecting an identity that is already given and in place, but discourses through which identities are (re)produced.

Identity as performative

In theoretical terms, this implies that poststructuralism conceptualizes identity as relational and performative. The concept of performativity comes from Judith Butler, and holds that identities have no objective existence, but that they depend on discursive practices (Campbell 1992). Identities are socially 'real', but they cannot maintain their 'realness' if we do not reproduce them. Because identities have no existence independently of the foreign policies that produce them, we cannot say that identities cause foreign policy. To take the example of the EU and Turkey, there is no objective European identity that causes a decision on Turkish membership. Rather, it is through debates over Turkey's membership application that European identity is being defined. Does this mean, then, that foreign policies cause identities? No, because foreign policies are also at the same time made with reference to understandings of identity that are to some extent already in place. In the case of the EU, the discourse on Turkey does not start from scratch, but with historically powerful constructions of Europe as white, Christian, civilized, and modern. Identities are, in short, simultaneously a product of and the justification for foreign policies. If we go back to the discussion of epistemology at the beginning of this chapter, we see that we cannot theorize the relationship between identity and foreign policy in causal terms, but that this is a constitutive relationship (**see Fig. 11.2**). This also means that poststructuralism theorizes identity differently from liberalism. As you may recall from **Chapter 7**, liberalists incorporate identity, but hold that it might determine states' outward orientation. In other words, identity has a causal impact on foreign policy.

Probably the most important development of a performative theory of identity and foreign policy is David Campbell's *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, first published in 1992. Campbell takes a broad view of what foreign policy is and distinguishes between 'Foreign Policy' (the policies undertaken by states in the international arena) and 'foreign policy' (all those discursive practices that constitute something as 'foreign' in relation to the Self). 'Foreign policy' might just as well take place within states as between them. It might, for instance, involve **gender** and **sexual relations**, as when women are deemed unfit to participate in the military because they lack the proper 'mind-set' (and thus would be dangerous for male soldiers to fight alongside), or when homosexuals are described as alien to the national sense of self. By looking not only at Foreign Policy, but also at 'foreign policy', poststructuralism casts light on the symbolic boundaries that are constituted within and across states.

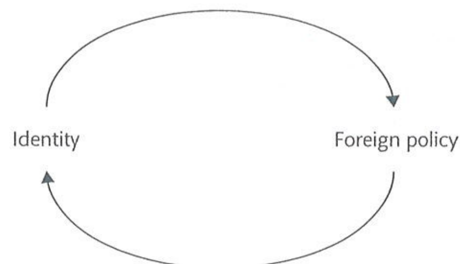

Figure 11.2 The constitutive relationship between identity and foreign policy

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Much of the concern in poststructuralism has been with what Campbell calls the 'discourses of danger'. Because such discourses work with very clear dichotomies, it is easy to see how the Other defines the Self. Yet poststructuralism also investigates those identities that are not so radically different from the Self. When we go beyond the simple Self–radical Other construction, we find more complex identity constellations that can involve several Others. Such Others might threaten each other rather than the Self and be constituted by different kinds of otherness. One case that highlights more such complex constellations is the war in Bosnia in the 1990s, where one Other (Bosnian Muslims) was threatened by another Other (Bosnian Serbs). This challenged the international community to undertake a **humanitarian intervention** (**see Ch. 31**), and poststructuralists have shown that this was legitimized in a discourse that split the Other into 'innocent civilians' and 'Balkan governments' (Campbell 1998). As Western responsibility was extended only to the 'innocent civilians', a full—and more political—understanding of Western involvement was avoided. Another example of how foreign policy discourses try to establish the identity of the Other is the on-going discussions of whether China has the ambitions to become a fully fledged military superpower, and if so, how it will use this power.

Subject positions

When poststructuralists write about identities as constituted in discourse, they usually use the terms 'subjectivities' or 'subject positions' to underscore the fact that identity is not something that someone has, but that it is a position that one is constructed as having. Individuals and institutions navigate between different subject positions and might identify with the positions they are given by others to a greater or lesser extent. Think, for example, about the way the subject position of 'the Muslim' has come to be used in Western Europe. Some 'Muslims' embrace this subject position and seek to give it a positive status by showing, for example, that Muslim organizations are as democratic as, say, 'normal' French, Danish, or Austrian ones. Other 'Muslims' protest that they do not see themselves as Muslim at all, but rather as women, Swedes, or athletes. As you can see, it is crucial which subject positions are defined as important, because they set the context for the 'identity landscape' that we have to operate within (**see Box 11.5**). We need to ask not only what constructions of 'the Muslim' are available, but why 'the Muslim' has become such an important identity to construct.

Box 11.5 Subject positions and images

Subject positions are also constituted through images. These are two different representations of 'the Muslim'. What are the differences and similarities?

Muslim business woman
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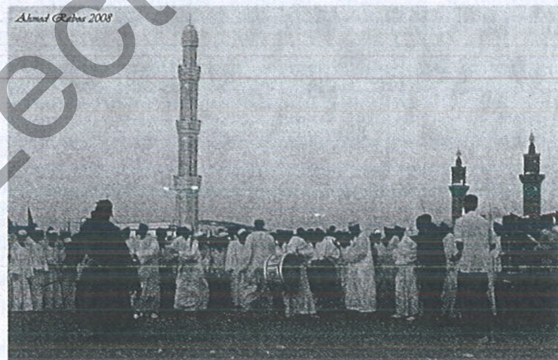

Sudan: the Prophet's birthday
Ahmed Rabea/CC-BY-SA-2.0

Obviously, some subject positions are more desirable than others because they provide a superior position compared to other identities. Take 'the Muslim' in Western discourses. Here the starting point is that the Muslim is inferior to the European, Western, or Danish subject. Thus, when institutions and individuals try to present a more positive view of Muslims, this happens in critical response to a reigning discourse of 'the Muslims' as not quite as good as the 'real' Europeans. A superior subject position also usually provides the subject with more room for agency. If you recall poststructuralism's view of power as productive, you see that power is very much involved in the construction of subject positions.

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