Post-Modern and Post-Structural International Political Economy

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1. Introduction

To give an overview of and an introduction to the state of the art of post-modern and post-structural theories and approaches in International Political Economy is an interesting challenge. First of all, it must be emphasized that post-modern and post-structural approaches do not constitute a coherent set of theories or a closed school of thought, but a convoluted, partly contradictory and labyrinthine landscape. They draw on very different authors such as Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Antonio Gramsci, Donna Haraway, Jacques Lacan, Karl Marx, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Hence, post-structural and post-modern approaches resort to theoretical-analytical approaches such as feminism, analytic philosophy, queer theory, phenomenology, Marxism, structuralism, and psychoanalysis. Moreover, many of the researchers in this field do not call themselves post-modernists or post-structuralists. Indeed, some of them (for example Foucault) emphatically negate the label of post-structural being applied to their work.
Second, the terms ‘post-modern’ and ‘post-structural’ do not fit together very well. As a matter of fact, they are often used very differently. While for some these terms are pointing towards the same thing and are simply used identically (Kaplan 1988; Devetak 2001), others emphasize that it is important to distinguish between them. Butler (1992) and Mouffe (1992), for example, separate themselves from the term ‘post-modernism’ as it is used by authors like Lyotard (1984) and Harvey (1991) and argue that this approach is heavily inspired by liberal, voluntaristic and relativistic ideas. For these authors, the “post-“ of post-modernism implies, principally, taking leave of Enlightenment as a political project. Most of the post-structural authors do not see this political redirection as a proposal worth striving for, but rather, as a very problematic and naïve analytical move.

Hence, there are important differences between these approaches. Compared with post-modern statements that “the subject is dead”, that "real bodies do not exist" and that "everything is happening accidentally", post-structural authors highlight the discursive structures and foundations of social interactions, while persisting in moving on the constructed ground of subjects, actions and society. Accordingly, Weeks (1998: 49) describes post-modernism ‘as the polemical life of poststructuralism.’ Thus, while post-structuralism is more about ontology – the way we understand and theorize the being/ the world – post-modernism is situated more on the ontic level, mostly referring to a historical period at the end of the 20th century. Following this distinction, in this article we shall refer to the term post-structuralism when we discuss basic, i.e. ontological, theoretical concepts and developments.

Third, the post-structural and post-modern inspired empirical and theoretical studies and debates within the realm of International Political Economy (IPE) are only just beginning. In the following article we shall therefore not give an exhaustive, let alone objective, view of the post-structural and post-modern IPE research program. Rather, this contribution constitutes an attempt to capture a fluid and exciting field, that is for the most part still in a state of flux. Furthermore, the article is itself interwoven with the author’s own subjectivities and academic-intellectual environment, which is inspired for example by regulation theory, neo-Gramscian approaches and Laclau & Mouffe’s theory of hegemony. Since from a post-structural point of view there is no objectivity “waiting” to be discovered by the researchers. Instead, the notion of objectivity points to a constructed, sedimented and, thus, hegemonic worldview (see chapter Contingent Objectivities). Nevertheless, and far from being relativists, we still rely on the notion of plausibility (see chapter Methodological Accounts). Hence, we try to give a broad, dense and plausible introduction to the research field in question.
2. “Post-”What?

What does the prefix “post” of post-structuralism indicate? The prefix is an analytical category and implies more than a simple “after-”structuralism. Rather, it refers to important continuities between structuralism and post-structuralism (therefore it is not a “non-” or “anti-”structuralism). At the same time, it points towards a decisive break and crucial discontinuities within some of the basic assumptions of structuralism (therefore it is not a “neo-”structuralism). Thus, the point of departure for a delineation of post-structural approaches implies that one begin with structuralism.

2.1 Continuities between Structuralism and Post-Structuralism

The basic assumption of structuralism suggests that language and society are essentially ordered. Structural approaches establish an analogy between language and social relationships by arguing that both share similar formal features and structures. They claim that society itself can be conceptualized as a symbolic system: ‘Any culture can be considered as a combination of symbolic systems headed by language, the matrimonial rules, the economic relations, art, science and religion’ (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 16). Furthermore, a view prevails that all societies have common structures, which guide or underlie the practices of the subjects within those societies. Hence, a structure is conceived as a self-regulated, self-transforming, and self-contained formation. It is the structure, conceptualized as a more or less closed totality, which determines the (social) processes and (social) meanings of the (social) elements within that entity.

Saussure and his linguistic theory, developed at the beginning of the 20th century, is the starting point for a structural conception of society. Saussure (1986: 15) defines language as ‘a system of signs expressing ideas’. He differentiates between the individual act of speaking and the ‘totality of word patterns stored in all .. individuals’ (ibid.: 13). By that he is dividing ‘what is social from what is individual, and .. what is essential from what is ancillary and more or less accidental’ (ibid.: 13-14).

According to Saussure, the sign is split into a particular phonetic sound-image (the signifier) and a particular semantic mental perception of the respective object, i.e. a concept (the signified). Saussure claims a strict isomorphism between the signifier and the signified: Every sound-image is strictly tied to a particular concept, which together form a certain sign. What particular sound-image is combined with what particular concept is arbitrary (ibid.: 68-69). But this arbitrariness does not mean that language is formed by the pure will of the subjects. On the contrary, Saussure stresses that a single individual is not able to alter the system of language, for ‘the sign always to some extent eludes control by the will, whether of the individual or of so-
ciety’ (ibid.: 16). Instead, each individual speech-act is based on an underlying system of language and the transformation of language is a historical process. Thus, his notion of arbitrariness denotes that a certain sound-image is not necessarily bound to a certain concept. This claim becomes immediately plausible by the ‘fact’ that the same signified (e.g. the concept of a chair) has different signifiers in different languages (“der Stuhl” in German, “la chaise” in French, “la silla” in Spanish, etc.).

Furthermore, Saussure postulates that a sign achieves its meaning only through its relations to other signs. Each term indicates what it does only through the differences with other terms (Wittgenstein 1953: #73-#76). For example, the meaning of the term “father” is given only in relation to the meaning of the terms “mother”, “child”, “grandfather” etc. From this argument, Saussure deduces that the sign has no positive meaning in and of itself: ‘in a language there are only differences, and no positive terms’ (ibid.: 118, italics original). In addition, the substance of the sign, i.e. the stream of sounds, has no effect on the possible meanings that are tied to it, because ‘the language itself is a form, not a substance’ (ibid.: 120). Only the formal rules of its combination and substitution define the linguistic element. For example, whether we are playing chess with figures made of marble or made of wood does not change the rules of the game. The substance does not bear any meaning at all: ‘For as a material object, separated from its square on the board and the other conditions of play, it is of no significance for the player’ (Saussure 1986: 108-109). And it is only within the rules of the game and its formal relations with the other pieces that a certain piece, e.g. the figure of the bishop, becomes endowed with certain value.

Accordingly, an important difference between Saussure’s theory and a nominalist conception of language is that the latter expect language to be something, which contains words that refer to objective entities in the world, i.e. fixed meaning independent from the context (Wittgenstein 1953). Against this view, Saussure argues that the meaning of objects depends on language systems as well. The object or event is always already “thrown” into a social context that gives a certain meaning to it. Drawing on economics, Saussure (1986: 113-114) argues that to determine the value of a five-franc coin, we have to know what quantity of something different (e.g. bread) it is possible to exchange the coin for, and in which way its value can be compared with another value in the same system (e.g. a one-franc coin) or with a coin of another system (e.g. a dollar). In the same way, the meaning of a word (a sign), i.e. its value, is not only determined by reference to a certain concept (a signified), but also has to be contrasted to other words (or meaning of words), i.e. comparable values.

In a nutshell, structuralists do not see social phenomena as discrete entities, detached from their social environment, but stress the context in which social actions occur and their meaning is produced. They have a relational and differential account of language and society.
2.2 Important Breaklines and Theoretical Innovations

Saussure’s thoughts have been very influential for the development of post-structural approaches. But some theoretical advances and refinements have been necessary, especially for going beyond a narrow linguistic analysis. The School of Copenhagen and particularly Hjelmslev (1961) argued that the strict isomorphism between the signifier and the signified is at odds with the claim that language is form and not substance, for it makes a formal differentiation between the signifier and the signified impossible and the duality of the sign would be unfeasible to maintain. Hence, Saussure had to introduce the distinction between substantial signifiers (speech-events) and conceptual signifieds (ideas). On the one hand, it follows from that distinction that his approach remains attached to a narrow linguistic theory, foreclosing its use for a wider social analysis. On the other hand, he contradicts his own claims that first, there is nothing material behind signifieds but only other signifiers. And second, that the only way to differentiate between different signifiers is grounded in differences that are themselves not material but conceptual. Hence, Hjelmslev suggested to formalize the linguistic theory by detaching it from phonetic and semantic substances. This theoretical move made it possible to transfer the linguistic theory to a wider socio-political analysis.

Lacan went a step further by separating the realm of the signifier from the realm of the signified. For him, neither the signified nor the interplay between signifier and signified produces meaning: ‘It's the signifier that creates the field of meanings’ (Lacan, zit. n. Stavrakakis 1999: 26). The radical priority of the signifier, in turn, has been criticized by Derrida (Derrida 1976). And Lacan's view that a signifier is not pointing to any signified but only to other signifiers has been excoriated: ‘The notion of “a signifier without a signified” is ... self-defeating: it could only mean “noise”, and, as such, would be outside the system of signification’ (Laclau 2005: 105).

Derrida (1982: 307-330) shows that a language's prerequisite is the possibility of its repeatability and alterability. He introduces the neologism “iterability” to denote that the production of meaning is an endless process which can never be arrested and that the linguistic structure can never be fully developed and closed. He indicates that a pure repetition of meaning is as impossible as its pure alteration. By that, Derrida works out the failures and limits of discourse in imaging the social structure – ideas, words and objects can never be correlated in a final way. Instead, meaning is constantly sliding and moving; there is always an undecidable play of meaning.

Furthermore, he claims that any structure needs a ‘constitutive outside’ to temporarily and precariously fix the play of meaning. Hence, this radical outside is always partly constitutive of the structure’s identity (Derrida 1976: 313-316). According to Derrida, Western thinking tendentially introduces a binary hierarchy between the privileged essential inside and an ex-
cluded, inferior, and accidental outside (form/ matter; essence/ accident; black/ white etc.; Derrida 1978; 1982). But these hierarchies are impossible to maintain in a permanently stable state.

2.2.1 Structure

The preoccupation with and examination of social structures is pivotal for post-structural approaches. While they go along with structuralist conceptions in promoting a relational and differential account of social structures, they critique structuralists for introducing a new essentialism. This essentialism is grounded on the view that structures are totalities and objective entities. Saussure, for example, conceptualizes language and, hence, the meaning of each term as a product of an underlying systematic that stems from the linguistic system itself. He is not able to grasp the social (and active) process within which the meaning of events and objects is historically constructed.

Althusser, as another important structuralist inspiration for post-structural approaches to IPE and the teacher of, for example, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Nicos Poulantzas, Bernard-Henri Lévy, Jacques Rancière and Étienne Balibar, made several theoretical contributions for applying structuralism to social phenomena. He provides a sophisticated approach by arguing that society can be understood as a relational entity, in which the economic, political and ideological domains are jointly articulated into a mode of production. He tries to avoid crude economic determinism by arguing that in every social formation there are different modes of production and that the conflicts within a social formation are overdetermined (Althusser 1969). Furthermore, he highlights the role of ideological state apparatuses (mass media, education, church, etc.) through which the ruling class performs control (Althusser 1977). Nevertheless, he himself is not able to escape the charge of structural determinism. The ideological state apparatuses only exist because of their positive effect on the reproduction of the relations of production within capitalist societies. Furthermore, ideology is reduced to its necessary class belonging. Hence, Althusser remains trapped in functional explanations which lead to a relation of simple determination. In the last instance, everything is determined by the economic structure (Althusser 1979: 97; 111). The subjects and actors are reduced to mere bearers of the structure. Consequently, structuralists can conceive of change only in terms of the unfolding of an inherent contradiction of the structure.

For post-structuralists, social structures operate like a corridor of action. Social structures guide the actions of the subjects to a certain degree, but they do not completely determine the subject’s possibilities, because they are constantly dislocated (see below, Laclau/ Mouffe 1985). Hence, the contingency of structures as well as the struggles within the process of constructing structures is emphasized. Furthermore, structures only exist, because they are
permanently produced, reproduced and altered by the agents. They are not operating “behind the backs” of the subjects, detached from the actions of the agents; rather, they are constituted actively (though not necessarily consciously). To account for this mutual conditioning of structure and agency, the notion of discourse has been brought forward.

Post-structural authors emphasize the role of discourse as constitutive for politics and social reality. A discourse can be described as a certain and always precarious structuring within a discursive field. It contains the sum of all verbal and non-verbal articulations on a particular topic, shaping the perception, thinking, and action of individuals. Accordingly, within this conception of discourse language, action and meaning are closely connected: ‘Meaning is learned from, and shaped in, instances of use; (...) so meaning is very much the product of pragmatics’ (Pitkin 1972: 84).

Articulation is understood as a ‘practice establishing relations among elements such that their identity is modified’ (Laclau/ Mouffe 1985: 105). Thus, a discourse is a relational structure, which has significance in a social, economic, and political context. It can be seen as an ensemble of signifying sequences, which together constitute a more or less coherent framework of what can be said or done. While some post-structural authors confine their research on the analysis of text and speech only (Pêcheux 1982; Fairclough 1995; Maingueneau 1999), more and more authors have broadened their scope of analysis to all articulatory spheres, i.e. action and language.

Hence in the past, there was an increasing awareness that the notion of discourse did not refer to a particular set of objects, but to society’s overall social texture. But the discursive structure fails to invoke a complete closure, since there is always something escaping the infinite processes of signification - an irreducible “surplus of meaning”, which points to the incompleteness and contingency of the discursive structure. Otherwise, the notion of discourse would simply replace the notion of structure without going beyond structuralist arguments (see chapter Agency). Therefore, post-structural approaches highlight the importance of discourse for the construction of (poli-tico-economic) reality. They point out the constructed character of actors in politics and society, and the phenomenon of competing, conflicting, and often contradictory structures of meaning and expression in social and political life (see chapter Contingent Objectivities).
2.2.2 Agency

Post-structuralists agree with structuralists against subjectivist approaches - like the mainstream economics and political science with their assumption of a rational utility maximizing economic man - that there is no such thing as a strong subject. Both structuralists and post-structuralists argue strongly against notions of subjects, which, according to Adam Smith, by their very nature form perfectly informed and self-interested individuals, which pursue decisions rationally or, slightly weakened, in e.g. Weberian action theory, on a basis of a set of values. For rational choice approaches, there is no society, but an ‘invisible hand’ and the natural workings of the market which reconciles the subject’s aspirations into a system of common well-being. The same argument has been brought forward by neo-realist, which replace the subject with nation states, firms or other units. They all invoke an agent that acts rationally and brings order to the world (or the object and the structure respectively). Hence, actor-centred theories conceptualize the subject with a free will, not constrained by any structure. However, as Colin Hay has pointed out, the dominant rational choice approach rests on a seldom acknowledged structuralism due to its strict assumptions about human behaviour (Hay 2004).

In contrast, structuralist as well as post-structuralist approaches emphasize that subjects are always already bound within a social structure. They highlight that agency is always imbued by its social environment. Hence, there is no autonomous agency detached from its environment, acting only on behalf of pre-existing characteristics. But structuralist theories, post-structuralists argue, overshoot the mark, by turning the relation between agent and structure upside down. Instead of having no structure, for structuralists, structure is all there is. Now the subject is completely determined by the structure; action is (depending on the respective approach to different degrees) preordained by the function and operation of the structure. There is nothing outside and no “exit point” from this all-embracing, pervasive and comprehensive social structure. Actors may think they have choices, but, according to (strong) structuralism, their actions are only functional components of a larger system.

World systems theory and structural Marxism, for example, are strong variants of deterministic theories, while regulation theory marks a softer version. Functionalism here means that subjects act to maintain the system as a whole without necessarily being aware of it. To have a function implies a line of thinking in which something only exists for the compliance of a certain (transcendental and ahistorical) task. That is why structuralists’ theories frequently argue in functionalist terms. Poulantzas for example, who theorized the state as the material condensation of a relationship of forces, argues that the state functions as a ‘factor of cohesion between the levels of a social formation’ (Poulantzas 1973: 44; 1978).
For structuralists the system works by its own logic behind the back of the historical subjects. For structural Marxists, by way of example, the economic base determines the (ideological) superstructure: 'In the social production of their existence, men inevitably [sic!] enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will ... . The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of consciousness' (Marx 1977: 21). Thus, the material transformations of the economic conditions of production structurally determine the subjects as members of classes. He thus can claim that ‘the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles’ (Marx 2000: 222). Although Marx painted a more nuanced picture of the relationship between base and superstructure in other texts of his voluminous work (see also Engels 1890), the priority given to the contradictions at the level of the economic structure, i.e. the dialectic between productive forces and the relations of production, has become a hallmark of Marxism.

Interestingly, and seemingly paradoxically, although (or precisely because!) structuralist theories do not have a proper theory of the subject, when it comes to the necessity of explaining change, they become rather voluntaristic. During crises, all of a sudden the subject possesses rationality and complete freedom of action.

Hence, post-structuralist approaches share with structuralism the rejection of the autonomous subject. But they do not agree with the claim that the structure determines the subjects completely. The decisive point is that post-structuralists conceptionalize the structure as an always, already dislocated structure. Following the argument of Wittgenstein, Derrida (1992) argues that every structure possesses an inherent undecidability: A structure does not hold its own means to reconstruct itself. It follows that structures are always open and decentred and that there is no inner logic which governs change. Far from becoming relativistic or voluntaristic, it does not follow that everything becomes possible. On the contrary: the structure is the logical starting point. A structure has to be there for it to be dislocated. The gap in the structure needs the structural reference. Hence, dislocations take place in a determinate constellation, which always entails a relative structuration.

Therefore, the subject is inherent to the structure, but the structure is unable to determine the subject completely, because it is itself dislocated. The subject is not able to act, because of any essential, pre- or extra-discursive characteristics, but because the structure is dislocated. The subject is neither totally within the structure nor is it completely outside it: ‘the subject is nothing but this distance between the undecidable structure and the decision’ (Laclau 1990: 30). It is not the absent structural identity, but the failed structural identity that renders the subject possible.
For some post-structuralists, the concepts of discourse and hegemony can be linked. Hegemonic practice shapes discourse, which in turn provides the conditions of possibility for hegemonic articulation (Mouffe 1979: 179). Framed like this, hegemony is a type of social relation. It can be described as the widening of a particular discourse – in the form of a socio-political project – towards a certain horizon of social orientation and action, i.e. a discourse-organization, through the articulation of unfixed elements into partially fixed moments. The ambit and the horizon of a particular discourse-organization are constituted by the exclusion of competing discursive elements. The exclusion of alternative articulations into a discursive “exteriority” is the substantial element of hegemonic practices of articulation. The organization of a hegemonic discourse depends on its coherence to provide a surface of inscriptions for a wide range of wants, meanings, interests and beliefs.

As a result, society’s structure comes into being through a conflict-ridden and violent process: ‘there is no law without enforceability, and no applicability or enforceability of the law without force, whether this force be direct or indirect, physical or symbolic, exterior or interior, brutal or subtly discursive and hermeneutic, coercive or regulated, and so forth’ (Derrida 1992: 6). Hence, the social structure reproduces and projects the historical relations of force, at least to a certain degree. The hegemonic actions and the meanings become relatively sturdy and are not easily reactivated at any times (see chapter Contingent Objectivities). This means that society’s social structure is never neutral. The social relations of force inscribed in that matrix affect daily actions, by structuring the possibilities of further articulations and, correspondingly, the possibility to configure and shape a horizon of truth.

Strategic articulations are an important part of discourses and can be understood as attempts to establish a chain of equivalence (a narrative) between different discursive elements. Strategic articulations are modes of organizing political, scientific, and economic reality. But it is vital to stress that ‘structures rarely have a simple, unequivocal relation to a single strategy’ (Jessop/ Sum 2006: 66). A discourse-formation is a stabilized set of discourses, where meaning does not float freely anymore but is, to a great extent, fixed. The horizon of possibilities is limited. A specific social structure is not only the expression of the social force relations, but retroactively constitutes the society as well. Thus, a certain discursive matrix is always a strategically-selective one (Jessop 1990; 2007).

It follows, that one has to differentiate between a structural approach, which explains social systems with the necessity to carry out certain functions (functionalist deduction); and a post-structural approach, which highlights the contingent developments of a social structure by not deducing it from certain necessities. To phrase it differently: there is a difference in claiming that nation states exist for maintaining and supporting certain power relations to the argument
that purports that through historically contingent processes and struggles certain power relations have been inscribed into the social matrix of the state.

2.2.1 Contingent Objectivities

The notion of contingency is fundamental and constitutive for virtually all post-structural and post-modern approaches. Unfortunately, contingency is often understood as mere accident. This is obviously not what it is intended to mean. Rather, the term contingency points to a structured uncertainty or, to put it the other way round, to a failed structuration. If everything would happen by accident without any kind of necessity, i.e. structuration, the world would be completely indeterminate and chaotic. On the other hand, in a situation, in which all actions would be necessary, i.e. determined, there would not exist any degree of freedom for the subjects. The latter would also imply the existence of an ahistorical and transcendental principle of structuration (see above).

The concept of contingency approaches this interface between randomness (understood as a complete absence of structure) and necessity (understood as a total structuration). Necessity only exists as a partial limitation of randomness and vice-versa. Contingency implies a certain steadiness of (daily) actions and meanings which are nevertheless constantly subverted and displaced. Paraphrasing Gramsci, contingency refers to chance backed up by force.

From this it follows that the truth of an event is the contingent outcome of struggles among competing discourses, narratives and articulations, transforming “what is out there” into a socially and politically relevant concept. There is no truth or objectivity outside discourse: ‘The idea of “objective” in metaphysical materialism would appear to mean an objectivity that exists even apart from man ... . We know reality only in relation to man, and since man is historical becoming, knowledge and reality are also a becoming and so is objectivity’ (Gramsci 1992: 1049). Hence, there exists a ‘struggle for objectivity’ (ibid.: 807). The outcome of these struggles is contingent insofar as no actor can anticipate the exact results of his or her action. However, the “scope of possibilities” to determine a discourse differs depending on the actors involved as the structure is always strategically-selective (see above).

Consequently, the pre-discursive meaning of entities, such as (economic) institutions, subjects of policymaking, and political identities, is denied by post-structuralists. This is due to the reasoning that the notion of a reality with a fixed and pre-discursive meaning fails to recognize the analytical difference between “being” (lat. esse) and “existence” (lat. ens). The (physical) “existence” of objects is not dependent on their discursive articulation, i.e. existence extraneous to any meaning. But, the “being” of objects (their meaning) depends on their articulation within discourses. Accordingly, there is no meaningful “reality” outside the field of discursiv-
ity. But, the "discursive character of an object does not, by any means, imply putting its existence into question" (Laclau/ Mouffe 1990: 100, italics original).

Accordingly, meaning is not simple existent, nor is it determined or entangled with the existence of the object. However, that does not mean that there is no truth. Instead, truth and relations of meaning are constantly constructed, negotiated and historically changing. Every discourse is the contingent product of hegemonic struggles, wherein different actors try to enforce their respective meanings and actions. Today, for example, the meaning of a colored paper with a Deutsche Mark sign on it differs completely to the meaning it had prior to the introduction of euro-cash in the year 2002.

Post-structuralists go along with the realist notion of independently existing matter as well as with the materialist claim that there is an irreducible distance between form and matter/substance. But post-structural approaches insist that the form of an object is historically contingent and discursively constructed: '[W]hat is significant from a deconstructive viewpoint is that the sensible thing ... is itself unthinkable except in relation to intelligible form' (Staten 1984: 7). Consequently, any applied formalism leads to an abolishment of a substantial difference between linguistic and non-linguistic actions. From that it follows that there is no possibility for an extra- or non-discursive meaning.

3. The Post-Structural IPE Research Agenda

In the following we delineate a post-structuralist conception of IPE. This section is by no means exhaustive or closed. Rather, it entails a still tentative approach to the field of IPE. Furthermore, we will also draw on authors who might feel uneasy about being labelled post-structuralists. But the ideas employed by those authors point in a direction that is, as we think, very useful for a post-structuralist IPE programme.

3.1 Basic Theoretical Assumptions

The starting point for a post-structural approach to economy is the assumption that the economic sphere is produced through competing discourses. Since there is no economy objectively given, the kernel of a post-structural perspective entails conceptualizing the economy as a (discursively produced) form and not as objective reality. Indeed, "there is no single and unambiguous "logic of capital"" (Jessop 2001: 291). Produced through social processes and struggles, the discursive forms entail, reproduce and constitute common orientations for perceptions and behaviors of a particular society. As a result, economic relations are one principle of social organization among others like patriarchal, racist, cultural, religious, etc. None of these forms is dominant a priori. Moreover, these relations do not exist independent of each other, but
are deeply interwoven (Habermann 2008). Hence, ‘the social relations we call capitalist are far from exhausting the complex of practices which make up all actually existing societies. In fact, other social relations or practices are the very condition of existence ... of capitalist relations’ (Lipietz 1985: 19).

Second, a post-structural approach relies on a relational account of the economy. Accordingly, capital is not a (substantial) thing but a social relation, a relationship between people mediated through things and goods, respectively. In a similar vain, the regulationist Michel Aglietta (1979: 16) argues that the economy is ‘solely a methodological demarcation within the domain of social relation.’ Thus, the economy can be conceived as a hegemonically separated and more or less stable ensemble of human relations that is expressed mostly through the exchange of commodities and goods. The meaning of the relations and goods are not objectively given but discursively constructed and historically specific.

Third, and based on the claim that the economy is form not substance, it follows that there does not exist an abstract and universal economic sphere *per se*, but only concrete and spatio-temporal-specific forms of the economy. These forms have to be understood as a specific organization of a manifold of different and partially contradictory discourses. The Keynesian welfare state, for example, was based on a relative congruence between tendentially closed and nationally organized Fordist economies and nation states that were able to relate economic growth with the provision of new jobs. It was internationally embedded, e.g. in Bretton-Woods system and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. However, Fordism and the welfare state have not been closed historical stages. The notions of Fordism or the welfare state are ideal-typical metaphors, which entail empirically derived categories that accentuate and ‘sterilize’ certain developments and discursive stabilizations. Hence, “Fordism à la Henry Ford was not widely diffused and was never fully realized even in Ford’s own plants in North America - let alone those in Europe” (Jessop/ Sum 2006: 68).

Fourth, the concrete temporarily and precariously stabilized forms of the economy neither arise by accident nor do they stem from a certain system-immanent necessity. They are the contingent result of previous historical negotiations. Different domains within the organization of discourses of a given society are hegemonically articulated as separated realms, like the differentiation between the state, the economy and civil society. Correspondingly, the economy as a specific discourse organization can be understood as the expression of previous historical and contingent struggles for a certain form of socio-economic organization and a specific spatio-temporal structuration. Certain social relations, like the commodity relation and the relation of capital, have been historically consolidated so strongly that a certain life of its own has been ascribed to them – they exhibit a “fetish character”.
Once these relations enjoy a certain temporal stability, they cannot be easily altered or removed. They possess a relative autonomy vis-à-vis the daily actions of the subjects. However, it is only an apparent autonomy, since, to endure, the organization of discourses has to be articulated and re-articulated everyday, every moment anew by manifold subjects. The economy, the state or processes of globalization only exist, because they are produced and reproduced day-by-day by the subjects – they have been inscribed deeply into the thinking and the horizons of truth of the people.

Accordingly and fifth, post-structural approaches claim that the political, the economic, and the social respectively cannot be separated unambiguously. Husserl (1978) differentiated between sedimentation and reactivation. While the former term describes a process in which the knowledge about the creative moment of a certain scientific insight is (almost) lost, the latter term denotes the possibility of recovering and, hence, politicizing this original act. Following this distinction, economic and social relations mark the sedimented product of historical struggles, which formerly have been inherently political. It follows that every social relation has a political origin. That does not mean that everything is always politicized. Rather, only those parts of the society are politicized that are negotiated and, hence, that are part of political struggles. On the other side, there is the institutionalised ensemble of (economic) rules, norms and values, which is sedimented in a given spatio-temporal moment. This ensemble of consolidated and routinized orientations for actions marks the basis that is necessary for more or less stable interactions within a society. Hence, there is no fundamental but only a gradual difference between the economic, the social and the political. Furthermore, the ruling forms of states, economies and socio-cultural organization of societies are inherently political.

3.2 Methodological Accounts

In contrast to positivism, post-structural approaches claim that there is no ahistorical and transcendent *explanans* (like universal laws), which exhibit a (socially) independent variable. Instead, theory itself has to be placed within a particular spatio-temporal social setting: ‘Theory is always for someone and for some purpose. All theories have a perspective. Perspectives derive from a position in time and space, specifically social and political time and space’ (Cox 1996: 87, italics original). As a corollary, it follows that there is no objective reality, like unambiguous figures, event and facts (see above). Rather the *form* (the concept) of an object has to be differentiated from its *existence* (its substance). The *explanandum* (the thing to be explained) is always contextualized, i.e. socially embedded. Hence, there is no absolute and pristine explanandum either.

Accordingly, from a post-structural point of view it is neither possible to deduce concrete occurrences from universal laws, nor is it feasible to induce universal, i.e. atemporal, explana-
tions from particular cases. Moreover, the application of a theory changes the theory itself: ‘There is no general law, there is no general rule ... . There are only contexts, and this is why deconstructive negotiation cannot produce general rules, “methods”. It must be adjusted to each case, to each moment without, however, the conclusion being a relativism or empiricism’ (Derrida 2002: 17). Thus, the idea of an independent variable is strongly contested.

A post-positivist methodology does not entail the collection of facts or proofs: ‘we claim that we know something when we are able to prove it. To prove .. means to show something to be something on the basis of something. It is clear that the first archai of any proof and hence of knowledge cannot be proved themselves’ (Grassi 1980: 64f.). By denying any pre-given ahistorical objectivity, post-structural approaches call attention to the contingent social process of constructing any objectivities as well as for the interests, strategies and hegemonic operations within that process: ‘the task of recalling the history, the origin and subsequent direction, thus the limits, of concepts of justice, the law and right, of values, norms, prescriptions that have been imposed and sedimented there, from then on remaining more or less readable or presupposed’ (Derrida 1992: 19).

Deconstruction neither implies that everything is possible nor that every analysis has the same plausibility. Post-positivism is not anti-positivistic. Indeed, some analyses are more plausible than others. But not because they are closer to a transcendent reality, but due to the fact that these analyses resonate more than others with a certain horizon of truth. On account of this, it is very different to claim that plausibility is relational than to say that plausibility is relative, i.e. indefinite.

Hence, the method of deconstruction involves analysing the hegemonic and contingent process of meaning giving. In this way, it shows that every objectivity is based on hierarchies, i.e. metaphysical closures through ethico-political decisions within an undecidable social terrain. Deconstruction implies ‘to interrogate limits, to explore how they are imposed, to demonstrate their arbitrariness, and to think other-wise, that is, in a way that makes possible the testing of limitations and the exploration of excluded possibilities’ (Ashley/ Walker 1990: 263, italics original). Accordingly, deconstruction entails a de-struction of sedimented and, hence, hegemonic world-views and a con-struction of alternative explanations. Far from postulating another objectivity, post-structuralists are aware of their re-constructed explanations as well as of the historicity of their theories.

In this context, to pursue genealogies involves focusing on the process, ‘by which we have constructed origins and given meaning to particular representations’ (Bleiker 2000: 25). Thus, a genealogy is a methodology (stemming originally from Foucault 1976; 1979; 1985), which explicitly looks at the historical development, conditions, constraints and temporal stabilization of discourses. Thereby, an alternative narrative is constructed, which questions the he-
gemonic view. Accordingly, ‘poststructuralists and their allies see their works as interpretative interventions that have political effects, whereas the mainstream (in both its orthodox and relatively progressive guises) perceives itself as engaged in the objective pursuit of cumulative knowledge’ (Campbell 1998: 221f.).

In sum, post-structuralists are not opposed to empirical investigations. Palan and Cameron have even argued for “post-structural empiricism” (Palan/Camaron 2004). This empiricism acknowledges the need to explain causality rather than to derive it from logic. It differs from conventional empiricism in that it takes the imaginary seriously “as an integral and constitutive part of the real” (ibid.: 6f).

3.3 Empirical Studies

In the following section, we will offer a general overview of post-structural inspired, empirical studies within IPE. Even though, there are very different approaches, they probably all share the view, ‘that an appreciation of the way value is deployed in the dynamics of political economy cannot be derived from an inspection of the way an object's materiality satisfies a need or want’ (Shapiro 2006: 43). However, no particular research field follows from that statement.

For that reason, we agree with de Goede (2006a: 2) that post-structural inquiries focus e.g. on identity, cultural representation, discourse, everyday life, the ambiguity of political dissent, and performativity. But at the same time, post-structuralists pursue studies on financial flows and crises, technological processes, materialisation of discourses (e.g. in the body, in border fences, in military weapons), security politics, welfare policies, accumulation regimes, (post-)neoliberal strategies, counter-hegemonies, the global political economy of migration, and constructions of nation state, the national interest and the common good, etc. It follows that the whole field of IPE is opened up for deconstruction.

The conceptualization of the field of IPE itself has attracted post-structuralist authors. Amin and Palan argue against the dominant conception of IPE either “as the study of systemic laws binding economy, civil society and polity” as in Marxism or “as a study of mutuality between states and markets” (Amin/Palan 2001: 567). Mainstream IPE would essentialize the national and the international. They call for a new IPE sensitive to “fluid boundaries, territorial and institutional" and with less emphasis on “order” (ibid.: 567). In a similar vein Daley criticizes the prevalent search for immutable economic laws. He argues in favour of a radical political economy “that begins from the premise that the economy is essentially prone to subversion and reconstruction in respect of other hegemonic-discursive positions” (Daly 2004: 5). Others have looked at the hegemonic construction of technologies and their socio-economic impact (e.g. Wullweber 2008).
Gender issues constitute an important part of post-structural approaches. Judith Butler (1993; 2004) was one of the first who developed a specific post-structural and feminist approach to sex and gender. She demonstrates, for example, that through the exclamation: "It is a boy", ‘one is also, paradoxically, given a certain possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate the call’ (Butler 1997: 2). Others analyse and elaborate the homo oeconomicus as a guiding model for identity construction – for men and women – within capitalist societies (e.g. Williams 1999; Bröckling 2002; Habermann 2008).

For IPE it follows not to take globalization or the economy as a gender-neutral process and relation with specific gender effects, but to conceptualize the economy as always already interwoven with gender issues. It implies, for example, to analyse the gender-political constitution of globalization processes. Accordingly, gender issues cannot simply be added as one more factor to account for in economic analyses. Instead, the economic realm is unthinkable without the gender relations that constitute the economy and are framed by economic relations at the same time. They both ‘come into existence in and through relation to each other – if in contradictory and conflictual ways. In this sense, gender, race and class can be called articulated categories’ (McClintock 1995: 5). Moreover, a certain hierarchy is always present within these relations: ‘Viewed analytically, the naturalization of women’s oppression – taking gender hierarchy as “given” rather than historically, politically constructed – serves as the model for de-politicizing exploitation more generally, whether of groups or of nature’ (Peterson 2003: 36, italics original).

Some works within that field analyse the specific gender knowledge within the global political economy (e.g. Çaglar 2009); some pursue a critique of the nation state (e.g. Enloe 1989; Peterson 1992; Pringle/Watson 1992); and some, for example, look on (women’s) survival and representation and post-structural feminist theory in general (e.g. Zalewski 2006a; Zalewski 2006b).

Other post-structural analyses focus on the cultural practices within the global political economy. Stuart Hall (1988; 1990; 1996) was one of the first to develop a cultural perspective on a post-colonial background. The basic assumption of these approaches is that ‘economic and cultural categories are logically and practically interdependent. In practice, social actors cannot actually define a market or a competitor, let alone act in relation to them, except through extensive forms of cultural knowledge’ (Slater 2002: 59). Hence, these approaches conceptualize economy and finance as something that is culturally constituted. Economic relations are made possible through processes of everyday life. These approaches develop a more culturally and historically-situated account of the economy and the financial world (Aitken 2005). Shapiro (1993), for example, deconstructs Adam Smith’s basic economic assumptions by working out
the specific historical and cultural contexts that underlay his theories. Under the topic *cultural economy* a separated field of research is already in the making (e.g. Sayer 2001; Du Gay/ Pryke 2002; Amin/ Thrift 2003).

Finance has become a very fruitful field of post-structuralist research. Gill (2003: 181-210) has made use of Foucault’s panopticon metaphor for an explanation of the powers of financial markets. Others focus on accounting and auditing. They ask how rating agencies estimate the debtor’s liquidity and which socio-political interests and cultural codes are embedded in these calculations (e.g. Sinclair 2005; Power 1997; 2005). Some pursue a genealogy of the financial markets (e.g. de Goede 2001; 2005). Sometimes finance is conceptualized as a performative practice (e.g. Clark/ Thrift/ Tickell 2004; de Goede 2005: 5-13; Aitken 2006). There are some works on financial modelling and statistics (e.g. MacKenzie/ Millo 2003) or debt restructuring standards (e.g. Soederberg 2003). Overall, these approaches focus on the construction of meanings and their temporal stabilisation: ‘Understanding finance as performative practice suggests that processes of knowledge and interpretation do not exist in addition to, or are of secondary importance to, “real” material financial structures, but are precisely the way in which “finance” materializes’ (de Goede 2006a: 10f.).

One very vivid example of the strength of a post-structuralist analysis is Marieke de Goede’s article on financial regulation in the aftermath of the *Al-Qaeda* attacks on the U.S.A.. While many have predicted a reversal of the liberalizing tendencies of the previous decades, de Goede argues with reference to Foucault’s biopolitics that a risk-based approach to combating the financing of terrorism emerged. Banks are required to monitor suspicious financial transactions, but they enjoy considerable flexibility in carrying out this task. By separating banking customers into normal and abnormal groups, the burden is shifted especially to marginalized populations, such as migrants, “who experience increased surveillance and financial exclusion” (de Goede 2006b: 202). In a quite similar fashion, financial actors are trying to maintain their privileged position in the turmoil of the current economic crisis by trying to draw a line between responsible and irresponsible bankers (de Goede 2009). With their focus on executive pay, politicians assist them in this endeavour (Scherrer 2009).

Other approaches seek to deconstruct basic concepts like ‘capital’, 'savings' and 'investments' through theorizing the economy of desire and by offering a libinal approach to political economy (e.g. Gammon/ Palan 2006). They argue that it is necessary to carry out a drive towards satisfaction: ‘Those disciplines that theorize the collective and interpersonal webs within which desire is evoked become more crucial than those that address the production and exchange of commodities’ (Shapiro 2006: 43). Finally, there are some general introductions on post-structural inspired IPE (e.g. Bertramsen/ Frelund Thomsen/ Torfing 1991; Daly 1991; Shapiro 1999; Amin/ Palan 2001; Gills 2001; Peterson 2003; de Goede 2006a; Peterson 2006).
4. Critique on Post-Structural Approaches

Post-structuralism has been criticized for ignoring “the inescapable reality of material needs” (Gills 2001: 238) and the “labouring subjects” (Laffey 2004: 461). Many hold the post-structualist emphasis on discourse for a denial of the material world. There is continuing confusion about the post-structural claim that the social realm is composed of discourses and that reality is always mediated through discourses, respectively. First of all, the notion of the discursive character of reality does not indicate that reality would have no effects. Rather, it implies that these effects only receive meaning through the discursive context. The attack of a group of men on a military base, for example, could have effects (e.g. dead soldiers), but these effects do not, per se, bear any meaning. Is it a form of terrorist aggression or a heroic act? In addition, in most circumstances the effects themselves are highly ambiguous. Hence, a post-positivistic approach does not strive to come close to the truth of an event – simply because there is no ultimate truth. Instead of looking for causalities and conclusive explanations, there is a search for plausibilities and plausible reasons.

Furthermore, the discursive character of reality does not entail that reality can be formed at will. Even though post-structuralists assert that no meaning is permanently fixed, the possibilities to design it are limited. The extent to which certain articulations and discourses prevail constitutes the result of a contingent and hegemonic process. This process always happens against the background of a strategically-selective organization of discourses, which are not easily altered: ‘the “structural” moment in social relations is now seen to comprise those elements in a given temporal-spatial context that cannot be altered by a given agent (or set of agents) pursuing a given strategy during a given time period’ (Jessop 2007: 42).

Finally, material relations (the “extra-discursive”) are frequently put in opposition to discursive relations. From a post-structural point of view this does not make any sense. For social relations are not material, i.e. not filled with matter (as long as they are not condensed in buildings, border fences etc.). Generally, the term materiality denotes, metaphorically, a sturdiness of social relations, i.e. a certain temporal stability. Because relations come into being through acts, temporal stability signifies that certain acts are temporarily reiterated in a relatively similar manner. But this temporal stability is already implied within the notion of discourse. Hence, material relations are always discursive relations. This, again, does not mean that there is no matter or that discursive relations are unable to become condensed in matter (see chapter Contingent Objectivities).
5. Summary

Even though it ‘is possible to say that IPE has been particularly resistant to poststructural intervention’ (de Goede 2006a: 1), it is most unlikely that the field of IPE will remain untouched by post-structural critiques and impulses in the long run. For post-structuralist approaches not only enunciate a fundamental and comprehensive critique of mainstream approaches to IPE by challenging their basic theoretical, methodological and epistemological assumptions as well as their explicit and implicit essentialisms (like empiricism, economism, voluntarism, methodological nationalism and individualism, and others). They also present and develop a critical, inspiring and sometimes surprising access to and explanations of different empirical issues.

The primacy of the political is the point of departure for many post-structural approaches. This is based on the assumption that there is no objective reality and that every social relation, independent of whether it is articulated as economic, technological, racist, private etc., has political roots. There are only specific horizons of truth in the form of precariously stabilized, spatio-temporal organization of discourses. A discourse organization has been defined as a temporal consistency and continuity of a society’s socio-political constitution. As a corollary, society’s social structuration is generated and structured through contingent social struggles. Hence, the study of concrete social structures is essential for post-structural analyses.

Stressing the discursive and non-objective character of reality implies that power relations are reflected without exception in every relation. In that perspective, it makes no sense to assume the dominance of a certain (e.g. the economic) relation, for social relations are absolutely interwoven. That does not mean that all power relations are always pronounced equally at the same time. The separation of the social relation into different forms of relations and the identification of specific power relations within these relations is analytically useful and methodologically necessary in the majority of cases. But this separation is always only an analytical separation. Furthermore, this analytical move effects our reality perception. Hence, every research design is quintessentially political. It follows that the subject of IPE and the approaches to IPE are not predetermined, but are themselves the result of scientific and socio-political negotiations.

References


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