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## **poststructuralism: what happened?**

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### **Books reviewed:**

#### **Why There Is No Poststructuralism in France: The Making of an Intellectual Generation**

Johannes Angermuller (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 133 pp., ISBN: 978-1474226301

#### **Ethics and Politics after Poststructuralism: Levinas, Derrida and Nancy**

Madeleine Fagan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 195 pp., ISBN: 978-0748685134

#### **Poststructuralism and After: Structure, Subjectivity and Power**

David Howarth (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 334 pp., ISBN: 978-1137266972

### **Introduction: the paradox of poststructuralism**

Simply digesting the titles of these three volumes presents a number of problems. Is it possible to be 'after' something that may not have happened? Can Madeleine Fagan and David Howarth legitimately talk about a moment 'after poststructuralism' if, as

Johannes Angermuller's title suggests, poststructuralism didn't happen in France? Do we need to revisit not just what we mean by poststructuralism, and how it might contribute to current debates, but whether or not there is, or ever was, such a thing? Or maybe, as Angermuller's title also suggests, while there is no poststructuralism 'in France', it may exist elsewhere. If that's the case, then it seems odd that many of those we usually consider as the leading lights of poststructuralism are French academics. Staying at the level of the titles, even though Jacques Derrida was born outside France (Algeria) and for all that he had a difficult relationship with many of the key figures and institutions of the French academy, he was perhaps the one that could claim to have inaugurated poststructuralism with his 1966 Johns Hopkins talk, 'Signature, sign and play in the human sciences'; and he was undeniably a French philosopher! Can poststructuralism really not be French?

And yet, the problems raised by the titles do not stop here. There is also a key ambiguity in the use of the word 'after'. This word has two principal connotations: on the one hand, it simply means that which follows in a chronological sense; on the other hand, it can mean 'in the style of', such that 'after poststructuralism' can refer to a form of thought in the style of poststructuralism. In this latter case, though, a lot depends upon what we think it means to work 'in the style' or manner of poststructuralism. Commonly, these connotations often overlap, as indeed they do in the two books that employ this titular motif. For both Howarth and Fagan, poststructuralism can be said both to have left a legacy of new debates and to have made distinctive contributions to a wide range of more established ones. And yet, if poststructuralism isn't the French theory we thought it was, then it may not be clear if the resources exist from which the theoretical work that follows it, temporally or stylistically, can draw inspiration. This is especially complicated by Fagan's title,

appealing as she does to Levinas to help us think ‘after poststructuralism’, when Levinas’ impetus was decidedly more post-Heideggerian than poststructuralist.

Perhaps, as Howarth’s title suggests, some of this complexity can be avoided by operating within a strong conceptual apparatus? If that’s the case then it is still a risky strategy as concepts have a tendency to traverse ‘isms’ in a manner that makes it hard to pin down their meaning within any particular position. Authors and concepts may escape easy labeling in most cases but when the label is as problematic as poststructuralism it might seem that we may or may not have a label but there’s definitely no glue or tape to hold it in place.

It would appear, therefore, that the titles of these volumes present so many problems that one may be tempted to think that whatever poststructuralism is, or isn’t, it is most certainly too confusing to warrant any further thought. However, this would be a hasty conclusion to draw. In fact, the problems raised by these titles give us direct insight into why poststructuralism remains such a vibrant field of inquiry, in so many diverse disciplinary domains. More importantly, the titles suggest ways in which the complexities surrounding the emergence and continuing relevance of poststructuralism can in fact lead us to the key concepts that animate the idea itself. With a hint of paradox, we might say that the nature of poststructuralism can be illuminated through a poststructuralist analysis of why it seems so elusive. Considering the three books in turn can create a sketch of what this analysis might be.

### **Poststructuralism as a field**

At the beginning of his book, Angermuller asks, ‘Is the talk of “French poststructuralism” perhaps the product of a huge international misunderstanding?’ (2). It is a good question, and he marshals some familiar support in asking it. First, and as

everyone who has written on poststructuralism has had to acknowledge, the thinkers usually brought under this umbrella term – Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard etc. – all denied, and some very vigorously, the application of the label to their work. Secondly, there have long been reports that within France the label has no real currency; from those who were, in some sense, part of the debates (Etienne Balibar) to those who came to them later (Slavoj Žižek). Thirdly, since François Cusset's *French Theory* (2008), we have known just how 'Anglo-American' the idea of poststructuralism really is; that it is, in fact, an invention of the non-French academy. At which point, most of us who write on poststructuralism in English make excuses and carry on using the label regardless. Angermuller adopts an importantly different strategy; he endeavours to find out why it is that this 'misunderstanding' has taken place. But how does one research a misunderstanding?

Angermuller provides an interesting answer to this problem: he embraces and employs the sociological perspective of Pierre Bourdieu. This is interesting for two reasons. First, Bourdieu is a marginal figure in the Anglo-American reception of poststructuralism and yet, since the 1970s, a major figure of his intellectual generation; a generation which includes those we do label poststructuralist. Second, and in tandem with Foucault, Bourdieu is deeply concerned with the production of knowledge within institutions. When it comes to the production of a term like poststructuralism, therefore, he is a good candidate for providing the methodological perspective needed to make sense of 'a huge international misunderstanding' (2). In particular, Angermuller draws upon Bourdieu's notion of 'the field theory of symbolic production' (9). Of course, the field is itself a variant of the idea of structure – one that places particular emphasis upon the ways in which individuals habituate

certain actions conditioned by the field, while also stressing that individual activities are never entirely structured by the field. It is tempting to say that it is a poststructuralist concept of structure!

Where the notion of intellectual field is useful, according to Angermuller, is in the way that it enables the framing of certain dynamics of centralization and commodification that drive the French academy. In contrast to Cusset's emphasis upon the role of the Anglo-American institutions in defining poststructuralism, Angermuller investigates the internal dynamics of the French academy to show that the (post)structuralist intellectual field was always already internally differentiated, so to speak. By way of an insightful double periodisation of the French intellectual field, both institutional and symbolic (43-4), he explains why there was never a moment when a single set of thinkers embraced either structuralism or poststructuralism. This same approach is also usefully employed by Angermuller to give an account of the rise of the new philosophers and the decline of the '68-ers within the French academy.

Importantly, though, he argues that the late 1970s and early 1980s was also the time of the rise of 'the post-national University' in America, an institutional form that was particularly conducive to interdisciplinary theory given its liberal arts tradition (chapter 4). In an analysis that chimes with, and draws upon, Cusset's earlier work, Angermuller claims that just as the mass-media in France shut down avenues for the traditional, less media-friendly '68-ers, it also opened doors for those same intellectuals as the post-national American University system had been an isolationist market starved of intellectual giants for much of the twentieth century. As Angermuller puts it, 'Theory passed from one field to another in which local conditions could not be more different' (80), and in the process the Anglo-American label 'poststructuralism' was born (initially, of course, alongside its siblings

'postmodernism' and 'French Theory'). Of course, it is hard not to read this as a narrative that is co-extensive with the rise of neo-liberalism. As the advanced capitalist economies lose touch with their manufacturing base by outsourcing labour elsewhere, so the rise of mass-media grows in line with the need to service the service economies. While this had the effect of curtailing the radicalism of the 1960s in France, by giving air-time to 'the new philosophers', it had the effect of opening up the American university system to big-picture thinking about the relationships between disciplines (both of which in turn provided new sources and mechanisms for the commodification of knowledge).

Angermuller's account of this process of institutional and symbolic exchange is convincing and a timely reminder that theory, of all varieties, exists in circuits of production that shape how ideas catch hold and gain purchase. It is also, in many respects, a poststructuralist account of how poststructuralism came into being: one that carefully addresses the conditions of emergence without presuming too much in terms of either individual thinkers or historical tendencies. That said, for all the rich insights provided by this sociology of ideas a certain concern remains: has Angermuller really dug deeply enough into the potential resources within poststructuralism for an analysis of its own emergence? One telling moment occurs at the end: 'Discourse and the social are co-constitutive' (99). Although perhaps a shorthand easily recognizable to most poststructuralists, it is also this language of co-constitution that has led many to see poststructuralism as a theoretical engine that all too readily runs out of steam. Moments of co-constitution become the foundation upon which non-foundational claims rest, and the resulting paradoxes are all too easy to see. Perhaps more work is needed in detailing just what is at stake in the

relationship between discourse and society (and other key terms)? It is just this work that is provided by Howarth.

### **Poststructuralist concepts**

Howarth has done more than most to bring the idea of discourse into mainstream political theory and political science. In the process, he has refined our understanding of this nebulous term in many important respects, not least by mapping the previously uncharted territories shared by Ferdinand de Saussure, Antonio Gramsci, Foucault, Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Norman Fairclough, to name a few. In this book, he continues in synthetic vein. He brings together a vast array of sources to compose a well-articulated defence and elaboration of the concepts under discussion (structure, subjectivity and power) while always using these concepts to stage important debates between poststructuralists and their near neighbours. Moreover, one senses throughout the text an ever-watchful eye on the forms of conceptual analysis that aid empirical analysis, and those that do not. The richness of this approach is evident on almost every page, peppered as they are with references to poststructuralist sources and to thinkers from across the landscape of contemporary thought: Critical Theorists, new materialists, Marxists, feminists, liberals. Taking one example, his discussion of new materialism (108-12) is a wonderfully effortless summary of its key themes in respect of the concepts at the heart of his own project. One thing is clear, this book is not just for the poststructuralists; it is a book that all those interested in contemporary political theory should have on their shelves and ready-to-hand.

This synthetic approach brings rewards, but it also carries risks. Howarth's 'Introduction' is an intriguing example of how difficult it is to negotiate what is meant by poststructuralism while also trying to think about what may come after it.



Beginning by limiting his study to ‘a problem-driven approach’ (4) within social and political theory (thereby, wisely, foregoing more exegetical approaches, especially of those theorists whose primary focus is scientific, literary, cultural, artistic, etc.), he proposes that we treat poststructuralism as a ‘style of theorizing’ that, in his version, draws together four important elements: Heidegger’s critique of transcendental phenomenology; the deconstructive genealogies of Foucault and Derrida; Lacan and Žižek’s decentering of subjectivity; and, lastly, Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxist theory of hegemony. Howarth’s hope is that this matrix of perspectives can reveal poststructuralism as ‘a living tradition’ that is ontologically developed and methodologically sound while also equipped with a sharp critical edge. The question has to be asked, however: to what extent can this matrix of thinkers be considered as resources for a poststructuralist style of theorizing? A more restricted definition of poststructuralism, whether by thinker or project, is unlikely to include three of the four corners, with only Foucault and Derrida remaining. This matters to the extent that the different thinkers of Howarth’s matrix have different understandings of what is meant by saying something is a problem. To the extent that his problem-driven approach follows ‘theorists like Foucault and Deleuze’ (4), the problems will not be immediately recognizable to the other thinkers in the matrix. To the extent that Howarth’s approach to problems is, in fact, driven by these other thinkers, then it may be a version of poststructuralism that (ultimately) could not include Derrida, Foucault and Deleuze. That said, while debate remains about both the problem of ontology and the ontology of problems within poststructuralism (and some of its near neighbours) Howarth’s book will play a key role in deepening and developing our understanding of what is at stake.

That said, the project of *Poststructuralism and After* is explicitly not guided by a restrictive definition of poststructuralism. Perhaps, in fact, Howarth's project really is *after* poststructuralism in the sense that, now that poststructuralism has happened in social and political theory (even if not 'in France'), we can incorporate its insights more widely into a new, post-poststructuralist project, by weaving it in amidst other theoretical positions? But it does not seem that this is Howarth's intention as he ends his masterly tour through contemporary political theory with a plea 'to continue to apply' the 'conceptual grammar' of poststructuralism and

its particular ethos of research, to newly constructed problems in various historical and social contexts, for ultimately it is only in this endeavour to make a practical difference to our understanding and explanation of concrete social phenomena that the value and significance of such concepts can be justified. (276)

Having shaped a post-poststructuralist social and political theory, it turns out that it is still in thrall to the transcendental gestures embedded within the very idea of the social sciences; application, justification, abstract theory vs concrete realities, and so on. There are tremendous benefits to domesticating poststructuralism within the social sciences, but the risks are equally great; for one, that we might lose the ability to ask new questions, drawn from new problems as they happen. Rather than apply a conceptual grammar, perhaps the task is to invent new grammars appropriate to new questions, conditioned by unfolding events, in ways that challenge our traditional understanding of the social sciences? This is the tack taken by Fagan and she treats it as a deeply ethico-political task.

## **Poststructuralism as questioning**

Conditioned in large measure by the critical turn in IR theory, a turn that situated poststructuralism as one of several critical perspectives within the discipline, Fagan develops poststructuralism as a mode of questioning rather than a grammar to be applied. From the outset, however, she has to deal with the fact that developing poststructuralism in this way is one of the reasons that scholars in IR, critical or otherwise, have tended to argue that it is a critical position without any real purchase on the international domain because, as Fagan elegantly summarises the view of critics, it 'leads nowhere'. What's the point of lots of questions that don't have answers? What's the point of challenging every foundation, but not being prepared to stand on one; or, to not acknowledge that you are standing on one? More pointedly, she is alive to the critics that claim that poststructuralism cannot but rest upon a problematic ethical foundation in making the few political interventions it tries to make; all of which tend to be a version of Jürgen Habermas's criticism of Foucault that he was a crypto-normativist. Her response to this problem, and the others that rest upon it, is two-fold: she diagnoses what is at stake in the separation of ethics and politics that these criticisms imply, and then she argues for a post-foundational conception of an intricate relationship between ethics and politics in which neither has foundational responsibilities. It is this latter aspect that marks her contribution.

Having gently criticized Critchley (and others) for still operating with a distinction between ethics and politics, Fagan intriguingly seeks to outdo Critchley (who made his name by bringing Levinas into discussion with Derrida and giving us thereby the so-called ethical turn of deconstruction) by returning to Levinas to develop an ethico-political post-foundational position. Fagan argues that the ethical

and the political are intimately related in Levinas by the 'figure of the Third'; whereas Levinas's evocative idea of the primary face-to-face nature of ethics is often invoked against subject-centred accounts of totalizing ontology, so Fagan emphasizes the third-person in that relationship to underline the irreducibly political nature of ethical relationships. And, just as the face-to-face ethical relationship brings alterity into subjectivity, so the Third brings openness into politics, not least because the third person is also a fourth, fifth and sixth etc. The work of Jean-Luc Nancy is pivotal in then opening these considerations up even further to broad ethical and political matters. But having opened up the ethical, divested it of subjective ground, and linked it to politics, there is the problem that always presents itself to deconstructive versions of poststructuralism: so what? Fagan does not shy away from addressing this issue. She makes two key gestures. First, she argues for a rigorous questioning of traditional ethical and political positions (especially in IR); secondly, she argues in defence of questioning itself as an ethico-political practice that supersedes any theoretical answers. She says: 'poststructuralist notions of responsibility or ethics tell us that nothing can secure politics and that this insecurity is the very condition of possibility for the ethico-political' (143).

And yet, there is a hint of having journeyed all the way back to the beginning. If questioning is an ethico-political practice at the heart of a post-foundational poststructuralism then there are those who may think that poststructuralism still 'leads nowhere', or, at least, 'nowhere useful'. There are two related reasons that this echo remains.

First, the emphasis on questioning as an ethico-political practice misses the all-important epistemo-critical dimension of poststructuralist interventions. For all the early attempts to distance poststructuralism from Kantianism, shaped largely by the

confrontation with Habermas's version of neo-Kantianism, it has become increasingly clear that Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze *et al.* are all, in key respects, critically-oriented and in that respect Kantian thinkers. The risk of merely articulating a post-foundational scheme is that it does not readily provide a framework within which to hold forms of skepticism and dogmatism to account. It is perhaps a tangential way of approaching this issue, but it seems telling that none of the following feature in Fagan's account: epistemology, critique, Kant, method. Where Howarth addresses these matters, albeit in a rather traditional way, Fagan glides past them and one cannot help but wonder what critical purchase her argument really has on those, within IR, that have already dismissed poststructuralism.

Secondly, Fagan's resistance to answers that are derived from foundational schemes leads her away from the potential productivity of answers that derive from the practice of asking new questions. In a manner reminiscent of Howarth, she curtails the role that conceptual construction can have in poststructuralist theorizing. Whereas Howarth creates a framework that tends toward over-determining immanent conceptual creation, Fagan's post-foundational practice tends towards under-determining the potential of such inventiveness. It may well be that the worth of questioning is not simply in the questions themselves but in the answers that they provide, answers that can both hold other positions in abeyance and avoid the dogmatic quandries of those that are based on foundational ontologies. For example, Derrida's deconstructions may be said to be repeated versions of the practice of deconstruction *and* answers to what we may glean from a text. That those answers will change as the conditions pertaining to the meaning of the text change does not make them any less answers worthy of the term. And they are answers that provide a critical edge from which to assess other – less self-aware – answers to questions about

the meaning of the same text. Fagan's post-foundational approach could do more, in other words, to embrace the new answers that come from new questions.

### **Conclusion: the event of poststructuralism**

At the outset, it was suggested that these texts contained a series of intriguing problems that indicate tensions within poststructuralism and perhaps also a way to think through those tensions while remaining true to poststructuralism itself. This paradoxical position can now be summed up. In Angermuller's book, we are reminded that whatever poststructuralism is, it is not a thing that can be located in a particular country, but an event that gained meaning only when it was severed from its original situation. That poststructuralism is not a thing but an event does not make it any less meaningful or impactful, but it does allow us ways of understanding it that do not require us to give it coordinates nor to claim its essence, in people or projects. All one can say of an event is that something new happened that can, in principle, be endlessly renewed. And yet, how best to renew the event labeled poststructuralism is not clear.

In Howarth, the task is taken to be the synthesis of different strands of twentieth century thought into a conceptual grammar that can equal that of the positivist grammars upholding mainstream political science. In Fagan, the task is taken to be that of opening up the field of enquiry to a practice of questioning that is, in-itself, ethico-political. Rich and evocative as both approaches are, they do tend to treat the event of poststructuralism as one that must be domesticated (Howarth) or set free to roam at the edges of thought forever staring in at the domesticated animals (Fagan). Neither approach, it seems to me, enables the renewal of the poststructuralist event as neither takes seriously that whatever poststructuralism is, or isn't, something

happened, and we must investigate what happened on its own terms, as an event.

What is needed is a theoretical toolbox equipped to study events as events; perhaps that toolbox is poststructuralism.

### **Reference**

Cusset, F. (2008) *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

### **About the author**

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