

Ology Schmology  
A Post-structuralist Approach

Engagement with ontological and epistemological issues in political study has been arguably less than full-blooded. Too often it seems that they are treated as unpleasant hurdles to be quickly vaulted in order to get on with the ‘business’ of political analysis. Bates and Jenkins’ article (2007) is all the more welcome therefore in cutting against this trend in its compelling attempt to open up a space for critical reflection. The authors rightly allude to the danger of foreclosure both in terms of the way politics is taught and understood.<sup>1</sup> This danger would appear to be especially apparent in respect of post-structuralist thought and the sometimes rather ungentle treatment it receives in the discipline. Notwithstanding the diversity and tensions within post-structuralism, what follows represents an attempt to synthesise what I take to be key elements in this emerging tradition and the type of contribution it can make.

Bates and Jenkins’ comment that there is sometimes a tendency in post-structuralism to ‘consciously conflate ontology and epistemology’ (2007: 60) requires some qualification. It is certainly true that there is not the same degree of conceptual separation that one can find in other traditions. Attention is drawn to the instability of any such division: knowledge is always situated in terms of fundamental beliefs about existence and, in turn, these beliefs are affected by what is considered as authentic knowledge – there is a basic reflexivity which cannot be neatly parcelled up. The central epistemological question is not what comprises the foundation of knowledge, in the classical sense, but rather *how* are the sources of knowledge constituted and made use of in concrete historical terms? But if there is no absolute separation it is equally true to say that there is no absolute conflation either. Stress is placed instead on an essential undecidability. A theological ontology, for example, can be developed in many different directions and with different results for conceptions of knowledge and methodology (e.g. Berkeley’s practical approach to knowledge as compared with Malebranche’s more mystical perspective vis-à-vis the ontology of the Divine Mind).

Regarding Hay's assertion that ontology is 'logically prior' to epistemology (2007: 117), I would suggest that there is more ambiguity than may appear at first sight. Marxism and the concept of class provide a case in point. By the end of the nineteenth century it was becoming clear that workers were not evolving *en masse* into revolutionary communists but were exhibiting a far greater predisposition towards social democracy and trade unionism. This knowledge provoked an early crisis for Marxism and, in some quarters at least, a major re-assessment of ontological assumptions.<sup>2</sup> Hay's assertion that epistemological claims are never ontologically neutral is well taken, but this is also true of the converse. So it is not so much a question of whether ontology is prior to epistemology, or *vice versa*, as one of trying to see how the ontological and the epistemological are articulated as parts of a characteristic relational whole or paradigm.

Bates and Jenkins correctly identify terminological confusions in the introductory material of Marsh and Furlong (2002). This seems to be especially true of the latter's view of realism. The authors claim that interpretivism is a position that 'reject(s) the notion that the world exists independently of our knowledge' (2002: 26). I am not aware of any thinker in this tradition who argues this. Both interpretivism and post-structuralism take for granted the idea of an external world. As Richard Rorty, an interpretivist thinker, puts it: while the world is certainly 'out there', the truth about the world is not (Rorty, 1989: 5). In other words, while the world exists independently it cannot be accessed in an unmediated way or in terms of a neutral meta-language. This is precisely *why* it has to be interpreted. And, of course, nothing can be interpreted beyond interpretation as such; we cannot break out of all history and see the world as it 'actually is'. So the issue of realism is somewhat inconsequential in this regard; many perspectives start from a realist position.<sup>3</sup> What is of consequence is what is done with the idea of an external world.

There are two main types of response. The first assumes that the world has an intrinsic nature that can be realized in positive terms as thought. This is paradigmatic of the idealist tradition and is reflected in all those discourses which posit some form of definitive conceptual closure. The second, however, rejects any such intrinsicity and

affirms instead the materialist principles of indeterminacy and non-closure. These responses are antithetical to each other and attempts to combine them positively (of which there have been many) inevitably result in inconsistency. Indeed Roy Bhaskar's 'transcendental realism', which in recent years has become quite dominant in political study, cannot but appear ambiguous from this point of view. While Bhaskar affirms that current knowledge is always fallible, and while there may be all kinds of discursive variations and contestation, there remains something fixed and eternal to which the latter can be held accountable: an extra-discursive plane of intransitivity. For Bhaskar 'philosophy can tell us what the world would be like even if we didn't have discursive practices' (Bhaskar in Laclau & Bhaskar, 1998: 13). Here the extra-discursive functions as a kind of regulative ideal or supreme index that serves to validate (or invalidate) the trajectory and accumulation of human knowledge and endeavour. In Bhaskar's terms there is a basic 'order of the world' that is 'ontologically' inscribed and which serves to measure the degree of 'epistemic fallacy' in any undertaking – i.e. the extent to which knowledge *about* the world is confused with the way the world *really* is. Yet it is this very notion of 'the way the world really is' – and the idea of a direct (or even indirect) access to it – that is the hallmark of all idealism.

Post-structuralism, by contrast, tends in a materialist direction insofar as it affirms an essential gap between the external world and the way we interpret that world.<sup>4</sup> No discourse is capable of eliminating the gap or of establishing absolute closure; otherwise there would be a complete identity between discourse and object. This means that there are no independent positivities, only historical and incomplete attempts to *positivise* the meaning/identity of objects in the face of that which necessarily has to be excluded as negativity. Yet in being excluded, this negativity also plays a constitutive role. Put crudely, X can only be given in relation to not-X ('light' depends on 'dark', 'us' depends on 'them' and so on). The more a positivisation tries to complete itself, the more it underscores the unmasterable and constitutive dimension of negativity. Consequently there is a decisive movement away from the object-as-such to a consideration of the context. The consistency of 'womanhood' and the feminine/not-feminine distinction, for example, is achieved in very different ways under the terms of traditionalist and feminist

discourse. The latter, moreover, is not any more ‘authentic’ than the former (it comes no closer to ‘woman-as-such’). Feminist discourse is likewise open to further challenge and subversion from Other (i.e. hitherto excluded) traditions – libertarianism, ecologism, post-feminist discourse and so on – without final resolution.

So how does post-structuralism deal with the ‘ologies’? Does the epistemology/ontology distinction simply collapse or is it, as Furlong and Marsh suggest (2007: 206), rendered meaningless? What occurs in post-structuralism is not a rejection but a reformulation of the distinction. The ontological and the epistemological cannot be simply elided, but neither do they confront each other as discrete independent realms. There is no ontology ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered; it cannot be reached or represented in any positive or palpable sense. From a post-structuralist perspective, the ontological is essentially that which shows the limits of every epistemological system. Possessing no content of its own, ontology functions as the ‘moment’ of failure/lack in all representational knowledge and which thereby reveals the nature of the latter as a historical-contingent enterprise. Feminist subversion of the gender system of meaning/knowledge, for example, is made possible precisely as the result of an inherent ontological negativity that prevents closure. And this extends to all social reality: insofar as every concrete order is marked by lack/negativity, then subversion and reconfiguration remain an ontological possibility.

Post-structuralism affirms an irreconcilable dependency: epistemology is constituted as a finite order against a background of ontological (and transcendental) negativity; the ontological emerges as the result of a basic negativity (the disruptions, contestations, antagonisms and so on) in every order. You cannot have one without the other.<sup>5</sup> It is on this basis that post-structuralism has tended to move away from the idea of politics (conceived as a specific arena) and towards a broader notion of the political: i.e. the processes and practices through which every attempt to ground meaning and knowledge in positive terms are immanently undermined and shown to be contingent. This does not mean that everything is political, which would be the same as saying that nothing is political. Rather it means that because there is always a gap – a constitutive asymmetry between finiteness and insuperable negativity - then there is no part of our social world

that *in principle* is beyond politicisation or, for that matter, de-politicisation. As Hegel knew well, the human being is the very antithesis of all nature and consequently our reality is always virtual; something that has to be produced and mediated historically and which *ipso facto* is prone essentially to political resistance and transformation.

1571 words (excluding below)

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### Notes

1. A degree of foreclosure is, of course, always necessary in order to establish the coherence of a perspective. However, I would argue that Marsh & Furlong's attempt to occupy a kind of commonsense-middle-ground by presenting perspectives such as post-structuralism as 'extreme' is one that does indeed reflect an insidious form of gatekeeping (Marsh & Furlong, 2002; Furlong & Marsh, 2007).

2. As is well known, Gramsci marks a radical break in his affirmation that class orientation - revolutionary communist, social democratic or, indeed, fascist - cannot be determined in advance but depends on context and political engagement: there is a clear move away from ontological necessity towards an emphasis on contingency.

3. Marsh and Furlong add to the confusion when they argue that a foundationalist is someone who believes in a world 'out there' while an anti-foundationalist is someone who rejects this view (Furlong & Marsh, 2007: 205). This is incorrect. If we take a philosopher like Berkeley – who rejects any notion of an external world – then we can see that his thought remains fully within the field of foundationalism. Why? Because for him all reality is thoroughly grounded in the pure archetypes of God's mind. And while post-structuralism and interpretivism are certainly anti-foundationalist (there is no ultimate determination), they nonetheless presuppose the independence of the world.

4. Materialism in this sense has nothing to do with the (realist) idea of an independent material world. I am using the term materialism in the classical philosophical sense as derived from the notion of matter: i.e. the leftover or that which escapes knowable (essential) form. Matter is therefore emblematic of non-closure, of an opening onto something Other that is always beyond idealist attempts to reduce what exists to conceptual form (see introduction to Staten, 1985 for a discussion of this).

5. As Zupančič argues, the space of the infinite is opened as a result of the failure of finitude (Zupančič, 2006: 195-196)

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