Week 10: From pillars to "posts": theories about theory

Assigned Reading

Dunne text: David Campbell, "Poststructuralism," (ch. 11) and Shampa Biswas, "Postcolonialism," (ch 12)

Dunne text: Steven Roach, "Critical Theory" (ch. 9)

Chris Brown (1994) "Turtles all the Way Down," *Millennium*. vol. 23, no. 2. (COURSEPACK)

Antony O'Loughlin (2014) *Overcoming Poststructuralism: Rawls, Kratochwil and the Structure of Normative Reasoning in International Relations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave. (COURSEPACK)

"The decaying pillars of the Westphalian temple"

- title of article (1992)

- premise: real change in the post 1648 world order finally underway

- yet dominant IR theories (esp. neo-neo approaches) still addicted to idea of recurrent patterns in international politics

- power, security & even cooperation could be explained within enduring structures (e.g. balance of power; hegemonic stability theory)

- question from structuralists: "has the world changed or have I changed"?

- answer from post-structuralists: "the world has changed, but you haven't"

- still grounded in modernist and structuralist logic that "treat[s] the given order as the natural order" (Ashley 1986: 259)

Vocabulary

- the "fourth debate" in IR has introduced a whole new series of terms to an already widening discourse

- also known as the "post-structuralist turn"

- grappling with these terms can be half the battle

- the new critics go by various titles: poststructuralists, postmodernists, postpositivists, critical theorists the most common terms

- but these terms can be used loosely and crucial distinctions can be lost in the process

- e.g. post-positivism is a very generic term that can also be applied to constructivists (Wendt) or Critical Theorists (Cox) but neither of these writers can be called *post-modern*

- what then distinguishes these new critical discourses?

The disappearance of the grounds of knowledge

- Reality a "social construction"

- Nothing new here (e.g. Constructivism")

- but Constructivism a non or post positivistic conception of social science that can be called historical/sociological (promotes a new epistemological orientation)

- postmodernism not only does NOT do this, but might be called anti-epistemological (anti-social science)

- also called "anti-foundational"

Terminological confusion, interminable debate

- the notion of "post" saturates numerous discourses in various disciplines

- especially prominent in English departments where literary theories can dislodge textual analyses

- by 1990s writers like David Campbell, Richard Ashley, & James Der Derian introduce students of IR to these "new" discourses

- the most frequently invoked writers are Jacques Derrida & Michel Foucault

- creates a new & evolving set of discourses that (almost paradoxically) are presented *in* mainstream IR journals as "dissident," "marginalized," & "speaking the language of exile"

- creates a backlash, and then that backlash is seen as further evidence in support of their arguments

- which are what, exactly?

Probably best to start with the critique (e.g. what's wrong with structuralism? why should we want to be post?)

- post-structuralism (by definition) a response against the structural, or modernist, logic in various fields

- by the 1960s numerous fields had fallen under allure of *structural functionalism* (Talcott Parsons)

- in simplest terms a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability

- shorthand terms: structural analysis

- in IR, Morton Kaplan, followed by Waltz (who of course gets it right)

- the point: analyzing structures allows application of a scientific approach to fields previously on the margins of science—politics, economics, sociology, psychology, and even literature (Northrop Frye)

- the hope: structuralists sought "objective, theoretical rendering[s]," and to break "radically with [their] predecessors' allegedly commonsensical, subjectivist, atomistic, and empiricist understandings" (Ashley 1986: 257)

It all starts with language

- the structural v. post-structural divide is perhaps most easily seen in the evolution of linguistics

- recall that Cox says "theory is always for someone"

- post-structuralists shift this emphasis toward speech: "language is always for someone"

- the world is not "out there" in the modernist/rationalist/positivist sense so much as it is enacted through language

- extreme form of skepticism, first evident in modernist literature

- project could be said to begin with Nietzsche (1844-1900)

- *On the Genealogy of Morality* 1887 (sees language as an expression of power)

- but Nietzsche is not anti-foundational (he believes in knowledge)

- post-structuralists go further than suggesting that language is about power to suggest that no secure foundations for any reliable knowledge can be said to exist

Modernist angst

- in literature modernists powerfully influenced by devastation of the First World War & Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God

- old certainties & values under attack

- in social theory the clearest expression of this angst is in Adorno & Horkheimer (Frankfurt School)

- BUT modernist angst in itself shows a residual commitment to truth ("flailing around for new foundations")

- e.g. T.S. Eliot, "these fragments I have shored against my ruins"

- post-structuralists want to: 1. take away even the fragments, and; 2. lose the angst

- recognizing that our temples are built on air is a cause for celebration

- why?

Rethinking liberation

- recall that in Critical Theory even classical theories of liberation (e.g. Marxism) were prone to re-enslaving the subjects of emancipation

- the point was to retain an interest in freedom but recognize that we must always be vigilant

- the point for post-structuralists is to obliterate all hierarchies & distinctions

- taken to an extreme, there *should be* nobody left to be liberated from

- how did we get here?

Signs & signifiers

- A signifier does not represent a signified quality

  e.g. "cat" does not connote "catness"
- Language a series of arbitrary utterances
- Differences between things linguistic, not real

Post-structuralist puzzles

- Epimenedes the Cretan
- Descartes: "this statement is a lie"
- can we be post-truth?
- What (or who) is left to be liberated from?
- Does an approach that decentres everything decentre itself as well?

Back to language (& Nietzsche)

- "The right of lords to give names goes so far that we should allow ourselves to comprehend the origin of language itself as an expression of power on the part of those who rule"

- post-structural linguists pick up this thread
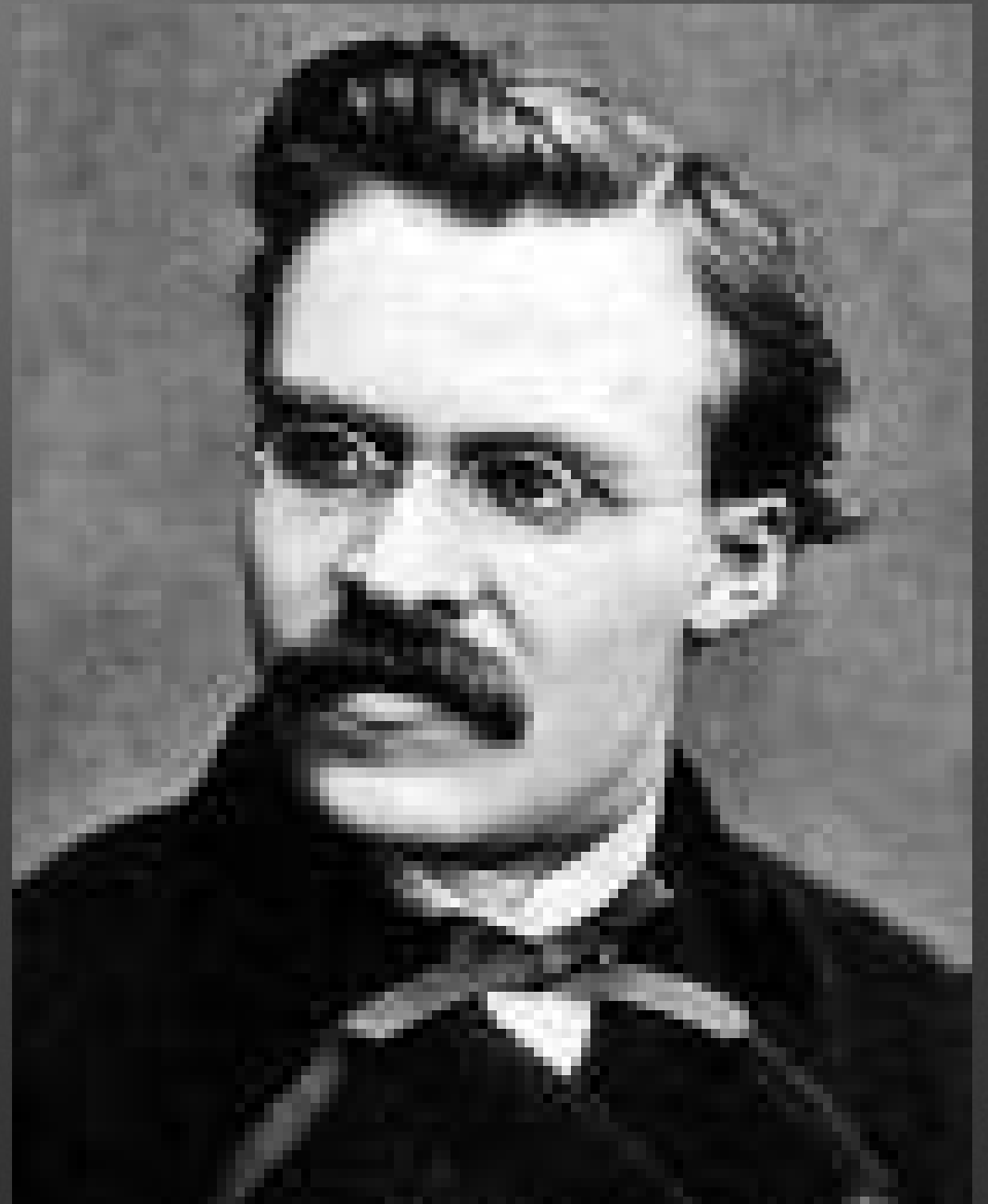
The Post-structural view of language

Discourses based on relations of difference

Texts versus other texts

Differences can be used to enslave or dominate "others"

"intertextuality" one of the buzz words of these "discourses"

so is "discourse" (or "discursive practices")

questions, rejects, problematizes all conceptions of difference (especially binary oppositions of the sort put to work in politics)

e.g. insider/outsider, self/other, friend/enemy, civilized/barbarous, terrorist/freedom fighter

Does post-structralism paralyze political action?

"postmodernism is likely to be a passing phase if only because it has nowhere to lead or practical future to offer"

Ole Waever