



## **Politics and Post-structuralism: An Introduction**

Alan Finlayson and Jeremy Valentine (eds.)

*Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2002, 239pp.*

*ISBN: 0 7486 1296 3.*

*Contemporary Political Theory* (2003) **2**, 241–243. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300062

Despite the fact that panels convened by the Post-structuralism and Radical Philosophy Group (out of which the idea for this collection sprang) have been amongst the most innovative, stimulating and well-attended sessions of the Political Studies Association's Annual Conference, post-structuralist thought is still often considered at best of marginal concern and at worst irrelevant to the study of politics.

The editors of this volume concede that the lack of uniformity in post-structuralist thought has made its coherence difficult to demonstrate and its importance for the discipline of politics difficult to explicate. Nevertheless, their stated aim is 'to show that post-structuralist theory represents a coherent and significant perspective on the study of politics as well as the practice of political engagement' (p. 1).

The traditional view of politics designates the political as the public domain within which citizen voters are accorded rights and can engage with public institutions to negotiate their interests. This public process is defined against a private realm of activity deemed outside the scope of proper political consideration. Politics here is largely a matter of the distribution of power, interests and resources. The practices of this distribution (the political system) are the object of political science; the beliefs, ideas and values animating these activities are the object of political theory. But this designation of the political is itself something to be investigated. Why, for example, should love not appear as a political concept or the family as a political system? Post-structuralism questions the very definition and understanding of the political.

The essays making up this collection are organized into three sections. In the first, Caroline Williams, Jeremy Valentine, James Martin and Jenny Edkins explore the challenges posed by post-structuralism to the modern conception of the subject as an *a priori*, rational, autonomous actor. Williams and Valentine examine the political significance of the concept of the subject within a theoretical discourse. Martin and Edkins explore the ramifications of post-structuralism for our conceptions of the state and the subject of international security, respectively, demonstrating, in each case, how post-structuralism calls into question the 'naturalness' of these conceptions.



The second section aims to show the relevance of post-structuralism for political analysis and includes contributions on a wide range of topics: the Front Nationale (Steve Bastow); decision-making processes (Stephen Griggs and David Howarth); the economy (Glyn Daly); social welfare policy (Will Medd); and models for political science (Paul Haynes). In each case, a post-structuralist approach is taken in order to unsettle concepts and models which are often taken for granted within the mainstream political science.

This critical interrogation on the part of post-structuralists of the objects, subjects and tools of political theory and political science has often evoked a hostile response from critics who claim that post-structuralists abnegate ethical responsibility and leave us with an intractable relativism. The final section of this volume addresses itself to this objection. Alan Finlayson, Mark Devenny and Robert Porter draw on different strands of post-structuralist thought to argue that the ethics of political thought and practice cannot be founded either on a natural order or on a rational ideal since both foreclose on the question of the nature of the political in advance. Communities, institutions and indeed political concepts are continually open to contestation and the task of radical democracy is to keep the political horizon open by attending carefully to the precarious fora of debate and decision-making that allows this contestation to take place.

The final essay by Michael Shapiro explores the limits of political theory as a genre (specifically in terms of its designation of the distinction between public and private) and the possibilities of using fiction and film as alternative vehicles for understanding the temporal and spatial configurations of contemporary political existence.

There is a certain amount of tension in this collection between the editors' stated aim of showing that post-structuralism represents a coherent and significant perspective on the study of politics and their acknowledgement that post-structuralism offers a variety of contending positions. However, there is a thematic unity to the diverse contributions. Williams's opening essay offers a concise and exceptionally lucid account of the paradox — explored in very different ways by Althusser, Foucault, Lacan and Derrida — that the subject of post-structuralist analysis is at one and the same time a site of subordination and discipline *and* a site of agency. She suggests: 'Perhaps the uniqueness, and critical sense, of post-structuralism can be seen in its efforts to interrogate perpetually the paradox of the subject and to imbue it with political significance' (p. 35). Each of the essays carries out this interrogation in a different way so that if anything can be said to unite the otherwise diverse perspectives in this book it is, as the editors state, 'a commitment not to let the definition or location of politics be determined in advance and consequently to ask questions about how politics takes place and to see how our answers to these questions have political causes and effects' (p. 7).



---

Some of these essays operate at a high level of abstraction and their suggestions and promissory notes need further amplification. However, this is an intelligent, thought-provoking and lively collection which offers an insight into the ways in which post-structuralism might move us beyond the framework of mainstream political theory and political science.

Susan Stephenson  
Sarum College, Salisbury.