

IPS FORUM CONTRIBUTION (ISSUE 2, VOL. 4)

Assessing the Impact of Foucault on International Relations

Introduction

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This forum draws on a selection of papers from two roundtables convened by the editors at the International Studies Association annual convention in New York in 2009. The discussions held on this occasion were unusual in that rather than seeking to apply Foucault to the problematic of International Relations (IR), the panelists were asked to reflect on the impact of Foucault on the discipline itself. Focusing on the central question of “What has Foucault done for/to IR?,” this forum therefore takes stock of the *achievements, transformations, and limitations* of the introduction of Foucault’s sociological insights and powerful epistemological critique to the discipline of IR, particularly in the light of the publication of the English translations of his lectures at the *Collège de France*.

The forum reflects the ethos of the roundtables in that it focuses attention not only on the contributions but also on the *limits* of Foucaultian approaches in and to IR, and also upon whether it is legitimate or even possible to pose such an interrogation. As such, it differs from the previous *fora* on Foucault in *International Political Sociology* (2007:296–302; 2008:265–277). We open with François Debrix, who argues that even raising the question of the value of Foucaultian approaches is an illegitimate one, and illustrates the problematic nature of the discipline of IR, especially its desire to classify and label theorists in ways that set up a “them” for an “us” to judge in relation to a contestable set of disciplinary demands. Oliver Richmond stresses the centrality of Foucault for critical academic practice, reminding us that “the study of power, knowledge, government, peace and war, have their own inherent biases” requiring us to be much more aware of the politics and power implied in the concepts, tools, and goals of our discipline. Jonathan Joseph highlights some of the limits of “scaling up” Foucault to the international level, arguing more specifically that the application of conceptions of governmentality outside the West may be problematic. Rather than discuss the limits to the use of Foucault, David Chandler argues that, in today’s postpolitical, postliberal world, Foucaultian theorizing lacks a critical purchase and is better understood as reflecting and reinforcing contemporary discursive framings of power in IR. Asli Calkivik argues that rather than

“subjecting... Foucault to the court of disciplinary interrogation,” it can be suggested that Foucault’s value is in the questioning of the assumptions we make in validating our own disciplinary assumptions. Giorgio Shani, noting that attempts to insert Foucault into the disciplinary narratives of IR do considerable violence to his work, draws our attention to the dangers of some postcolonial appropriations of Foucault, which have the unintended consequence of silencing the colonized. In conclusion, Mustapha Kamal Pasha provides a more positive reading of Foucault’s engagement with IR. Pasha credits Foucault’s “highly productive methods of inquiry into the making and unmaking of modern subjectivity” with opening up “vast thinking spaces of the limits of Western IR”—limits that are explored in some of the contributions to the forum.

We Other IR Foucaultians

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When an interrogation whose purpose seems to be to assess the utility of Foucault’s work and Foucault-inspired ideas in a particular domain of political analysis (IR) is initiated, one cannot help but wonder whether a logic of confession or justification is being mobilized. Such a confessional logic seems to interpellate “we other/us all” (*nous autres*) IR Foucaultians¹ and demands to be addressed as a precondition for any discussion about what it might mean to deploy Foucaultian analytics in IR. Thus, I find myself incapable of answering the questions I have been asked to reflect on without addressing these interrogations first. “What has Foucault done for International Relations?” and “What is Foucault’s impact on International Relations?” are injunctions that call Foucault-influenced scholars (*nous autres* Foucaultians, whoever “we” may be²) to demonstrate, preferably through a series of irrefutable proofs, what they have contributed to a domain of disciplinary activity (IR) whose very definitions and demarcations seem to require no further explanation.

The questions that frame this forum may well be in need of what one can consider to be a “Foucaultian” treatment. That is to say, the opening (and delimiting) interrogations as injunctions can be subjected to a prior mode of questioning (about what authorizes their discursive possibility) so that the sense of closure, decisiveness, and finality they seem to call for (and that calls “us” in) may be rendered less normal, commonplace, or acceptable. Among the elements of closure we find in this forum’s framing interrogations is a request made to the so-called IR Foucaultians to abide by rules of disciplinary utility (what do you do for IR?) and knowledge accumulation (how does your brand of analysis build upon or “impact” what “non-Foucaultian IR scholars” have already demonstrated or constructed?).

A Foucault-inspired theorist might want to start the questioning of the framing interrogations and admonitions by deploying two lines of preliminary inquiry. First, what or who is a Foucaultian? What does it mean to be Foucaultian? How

¹This formulation, with its double-entendre in English (“we other” and “us all”), is meant to recall Foucault’s “We ‘Other Victorians’” (*nous autres Victoriens*) phrasing from his *History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1978).

²Although, according to some, “usual suspects” in supposedly “radical poststructuralist” IR are never hard to find (Chandler 2009:61).