

Reason has to be turned back on itself, postmodernists proclaim. Postmodernism has been perceived as a controversial theoretical development in the studies of international relations, basically because it appears to threaten the integrity and usefulness of the discipline. But what does this imply about the previously discussed rationalist project and its analytical languages?

Mostly, **naivety**. Orthodox rationalists and their analytical languages appear to lead towards “the truth”, but as “orthodox rationalists do not know what they do not know”, it comes as no surprise that detachment and the hypothetico-deductive method have proven of little value to understand human and world affairs. Basically, the epistemological price-tag of orthodox rationalism comprises that the longed-for truth without preconceptions, resulting in a maximised capacity for prediction and control, proves to be of restricted value in explaining what it set out to explain.

But what are the findings if we apply reason on itself?

As orthodox science has to be immune from the influence of power, the en-masse prioritizing of reason as an end in itself is doomed to fail if **power and knowledge** correlate, as postmodernists argue. As reason stems from knowledge – you can only reason about and detach yourself from what you know – knowledge has to be pure. “But it isn’t”, postmodernist moan, and point out that power and knowledge are mutually supportive. Modes of interpretation – analytical languages – are consistent to operations of power, which lead to a contamination of knowledge. A clear example is the state, by no means a pre-given feature of world affairs, but a man-made feature upon which all analytical languages are based. “How can you claim to be detached and in the pursuit of pure knowledge if you remain attached to man-made features as states and sovereignty”, postmodernists would challenge, as “different configurations of power and knowledge give rise to different conceptions of sovereignty, statehood and intervention” (Devetak), all compatible with the modernist project, yet all so different. As power influences knowledge, any attempt to reach the “truth without preconceptions” has to fail.

Postmodernists often use **genealogy** to expose and register the significance of power-knowledge relations. It focuses on the processes by which origins have been constructed and by which particular representations of the past guide daily lives and social/political options. Far from representing history, “accepted world history” (and thus the foundation for rationalist analysis of world affairs) is full of exclusions and cover-ups. Postmodernists therefore focus on counter-histories, less to portray the impossible-to-get-to “truth”, but to highlight that there are many histories, not one grand-history. All knowledge is situated in particular time and place issues from particular perspectives. As knowledge is never unconditioned and plurality of perspectives reigns, the modern ideal of an objective or all-encompassing perspective is absolutely unrealistic to reach. Issues of orthodox international relations are thus struggles to impose authoritative interpretations of these, with hegemonic interpretations often being confused with “the truth”.

Postmodernism is also concerned with the “**textual interplay behind power politics**”. With the world being understood as a “text”, all reference to it are interpretative. Orthodox analytical languages qualify as such interpretations, but postmodernists argue that interpretations of interpretations are more helpful in understanding world affairs than interpretations themselves. Once again, as interpretations are grounded in knowledge and knowledge correlates with power, the mere idea of basing rationalist conclusions upon these constructions are absurd.

When George Bush refers to “good and evil” and frames the world in such terms, techniques just as used during the Cold war era, postmodernists argue that neither term is pure or complete, but only becomes so in contrast to the other. This analysis is referred to as **deconstruction**, the unsettling of what are taken to be stable concepts and conceptual oppositions. As each term depends on the other, neither term is clear nor truly oppositional, and if analytical languages grounded in the modernist project reach a stage where oppositions are used in the process of rational thought, rationalism fails. **Double readings** are also a useful, postmodernist tool to illustrate shortcomings of dominating analytical languages. The concept of “anarchy” (on the state-level) is a good example, as realism, for example, grounds its problems on the lack of a central rule. Clearly, the anarchy problematique rests on a series of questionable, theoretical suppositions or exclusions, and sovereignty and anarchy are mutually exclusive concepts, which have to be deconstructed. By double-reading the concept of anarchy it becomes possible to show that the anarchy problematique orthodox analytical languages rest upon only work based upon certain assumptions, and if the supposedly rational conclusions of the modernist project rest upon such assumptions, failure of true explanation is inescapable.

International relations are concerned with long-standing themes such as states, sovereignty and violence. Postmodernism revises these themes in view of insights gained from genealogy and deconstruction, which means that it has to be questioned by what means the sovereign state has been institutionalized as the normal mode of international subjectivity. Of course the world is made up out of states to which orthodox analytical languages refer, but if reason is turned back on itself, it appears unreasonable that the world could not be or become a completely different one. Therefore, contemporary en-masse rationalism as an end in itself only operates within man-made parameters and is, observed from the postmodern sidelines, not all that rational. “Postmodernism is thus interested in how prevailing modes of subjectivity neutralise or conceal their arbitrariness by projecting an image of normalcy, naturalness, or necessity” (Devetak).

Postmodernism critiques the **ethics of sovereignty** and subsequent exclusion and questions whether the state can any longer be a useful descriptive category or an effective response to humanity’s problems. Postmodernists also argue that **democracy** within sovereign but historically quite arbitrary states is incompatible with democracy in an increasing interdependent, globalized world.

In **conclusion**, postmodernism can be described as an all-out critique of the prevailing modernity project and the world & analytical languages it created. Postmodernism focuses on counter-hegemonic-theories and explains how conclusions perceived as rational only work within certain parameters, as (hegemonic) power and knowledge correlate. It aims at explaining that it is impossible to strive for pure, detached knowledge without presuppositions under such circumstances. Postmodernism is an alternative approach to world affairs, not emphasizing the sovereign subject or object, but the historical, cultural, and linguistic practices in which subjects and objects are constructed. Reason is being turned back on its naive self.