REVIEW

Roxanne Lynne Doty, Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North/South Relations (Minnesota University Press, 1996), Intro and Ch 4
Iver Neumann, “From Meta to Method: The Materiality of Discourse,” ms

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This panel considers the excellent scholarship of Ido Oren, Roxanne Doty and Iver Neumann on the complex interconnections between discourse and identity. The authors approach this question from very different perspectives: Doty and Neumann interpret “discourse” through post-positivist lenses influenced significantly, but not exclusively, by the works of Michel Foucault, whereas Oren considers the “ideology” of US political science drawing on insights from Max Weber, Karl Mannheim and Antonio Gramsci. Like all constructivists, these authors treat discourses (or ideologies) as historically contingent systems of (or for the production of) representations and meanings that guide cognition and action. Such systems produce and organize the categories that form both the context and the interpretive tools for identity construction. Unlike some constructivists, though, these three authors share a critical standpoint that questions the subject-object opposition found in positivist approaches; highlights the role of power in determining which perspective holds most sway; and calls upon colleagues to investigate the “pedigree” of prevailing assumptions (Oren, 181). For these authors, identity is not a variable, which connotes stasis, but a process—indeed a site of constant political struggle. Where they differ most interestingly, in my opinion, is on the relation between discourse and practice, and consequently on the nature of power and change.
Before I begin, I should clarify my own position as someone who finds post-positivist scholarship illuminating, intriguing, even seductive, but remains unwilling or unable—I can’t decide which—to liberate myself entirely from positivist constraints.

Like most constructivists, these authors argue that discourses mediate the reflexive interplay between self and other that constitutes identity. They differ from other, less critical constructivists in emphasizing the role that identity (or perspective) plays in organizing discourse. Other things being equal, we organize our interpretations of why people “like us” interact with “others” as we do around some critical notion of who “we” are. Oren, for example, argues that the mainstream discipline of political science in the United States, written by scholars with privileged access to state institutions, has consistently been organized around the “master value” (p. 16) of preserving the identification of the United States with democracy and the identification of political science as serving democracy’s ends. The actual substantive content of political science scholarship, meanwhile, has shifted dramatically depending on whom the US government regarded as possible allies and whom it regarded as enemies. Thus, for example, scholars who praised the Soviet Union for redistributive democracy in the 1930’s came to dismiss such “substantive” definitions of democracy in the 1950s in favor of procedural legitimacy.

The claim that discourse hinges upon perspective implies that multiple interpretations of practice can and do coexist at any one place and time. Discourse and identity, therefore, are not stable and intersubjective, but constitute terrains where different perspectives collide, compete, negotiate, accommodate and resist one another. The ability of a single perspective to assert itself and authoritatively frame the identity of
others depends upon the power it exercises. Thus, Oren notes the persistent presence of oppositional tendencies within US political science, but notes further that such tendencies have rarely enjoyed much resonance within the discipline (pp. 18-19). He attributes this lack of resonance in part—but not exclusively—to the privileged access that mainstream scholars enjoyed to the financial resources, prestige and influence of state institutions and private foundations.

The nexus between discourse and power leads all three authors to call for a reflexive approach that self-consciously “takes into account the historical position of their own scholarship.” Without such reflection, Oren suggests, scholars may look for data in very same historical accounts that produce our hypotheses, spinning out tautologies that legitimate existing structures. (p. 178-179)

All three authors agree that discourse and power are linked, but differ on the nature of this link. Such differences have important implications for how they conceptualize change. The work by Ido Oren most closely approximates the positivist approach. Oren treats ideology and power almost as variables, that is, as relatively static, interconnected but analytically, if not actually discrete phenomena. Power has substance and resides in state and private institutions. As a result, Oren offers the reader a clear and persuasive narrative about the causes and nature of change: international conflicts cause change in US political science because mainstream scholars have access to institutional resources that shape their perspective and facilitate the dissemination of their perspective.

Because Oren treats power as a property possessed by large institutions, without examining the daily practices in which power is exercised in the discipline—such as the practices by which scholars are recruited, trained and evaluated—his arguments,
persuasive as they are, still rely on correlations to make their point. In fact, Oren’s account privileges national identity as the locus of identity most important to organizing the discipline of political science without considering how other perspectives of self and other may contribute to ideology. Oren convinces me that national identity is important, but I suspect that most of the scholars he examines were also writing from the perspective of a member of a dominant class in relation to domestic others, and from the masculine perspective in relation to a feminine others. Thus, the ideology of US political science emerges from the confluence of multiple identities. I do not say that Oren should have addressed these other perspectives—surely he has done enough—but that we as scholars should be aware they may be there.

This is where post-positivists come in. Doty does not privilege one perspective over the others and, consequently, does not claim to address causes. Instead, she examines how multiple perspectives overlap and intersect to make a range of practices imaginable and legitimate. Doty’s defines discourse as a “structured, relational totality” that subsumes practice. The categories and representation of discourse have no meaning except as they relate to other categories and representations. The meaning of “democracy” differs when “articulated with antifascism” from when it is “articulated with anticommunism.”(p. 8) These juxtapositions themselves can be interpreted only through models and metaphors borrowed from other spheres of experience: thus, imperial agents do not simply draw on direct experience to make sense of their relation with colonized peoples; they also interpret that experience through models used to interpret relations, for example, between adults and children, or between men and women. Thus, they rehearse relations with colonized peoples in their everyday family life, making them
seem more natural. Such reliance upon intertextuality also suggests that discourse is fluid and unstable.

In this view, power does not reside in a discrete and identifiable set of institutions. Rather, these institutions represent the accumulation of everyday practices in which discourse provides a logic by which individuals observe, interpret, authorize or discipline the actions of themselves and others. If discourse governs the exercise of power, then hegemony increases when discourses are stable enough to appear natural. In particular, Doty emphasizes the significance of “nodal points”—such as national identity pace Oren—as “privileged discursive points that fix meaning and establish positions that make predication possible.”(p. 8) Finally, Doty argues that in times of organic crises, when the relations between overlapping discourses become less stable and more problematic, the discursive practices designed to fix such representations become more intense(pp. 8-9).

Doty does not claim to explain change. She traces how the iterated representations with which “first world” societies have portrayed “third world” peoples have made the repeated, brutal suppressions of third world rebellions imaginable and legitimate, despite claims of human progress. She does note that periodic occur that reconfigure meanings and representations to accommodate new conditions and practices, but the overall story emphasizes continuity over change. She particularly emphasizes the persistence of binary oppositions, where one pole represent “virtue,” “rationality” and “manliness” where the other represents “corruption,” “irrationality” and “feminity “ to fix meaning over time. One need only review the rhetoric of the Presidents Bush about Iraq to recognize the relevance of her work.
In some respects, though, Doty’s method not only fails to account for change, but does not allow it. The very comprehensiveness of Doty’s concept of discourses makes it very difficult for her to identify within her theoretical framework where, when and how change might come. Doty notes very reasonably the constraints that prevented her from considering the subaltern identities and discourses that might disrupt and resist prevailing discourses, but her treatment of discourse provides no conceptual tools to understand what such disruptions might look like and under what circumstances they might occur. Therefore, she must describe the various changes in world politics that might have contributed to periodic reinscriptions in an ad hoc manner outside the language of her theoretical framework.

To some extent, these concern, reflect her choice of case studies. Binary oppositions do make possible the violent suppression of much weaker parties and restrict the room for maneuver or negotiation. But I wonder if binary oppositions would predominate so much where power was more evenly distributed or where the exercise of power did not depend so heavily on violence. For example, I wonder if the discourses surrounding efforts to foster civil society in the Third World weave the logics of difference and equivalence in a more complex fashion.

Unlike Doty, Neumann is explicitly interested in change. Their approaches are very similar, but I will focus on two differences. First, Neumann recognizes a “complex interplay” between discourse and practice but still keeps them analytically separate. In his article in Millennium, Neumann defines discourse as a system for the formation of statements, and defines practice as “incorporated and material patterns of action that are organized around the common implicit understandings of the actors.”(Neumann, 2002)
Together, discourse and practice provide a “repertoire of actions” that “exists for a particular type of subject in a particular type of context.”(2002) This formulation carves out a space, however small, where agents can change or expand existing patterns of practice(2002). For example, an individual scholar—Neumann cites Edward Said(2003)—can articulate existing patterns in a way that alters the discourse and even subsequent practice (an argument that itself echoes Gramsci’s organic intellectual). Altering such practical patterns always requires the exercise of power, and is likely to be resisted--pace Doty’s organic crisis--by people whose authority is invested in existing discourses. Both discourse and practice, therefore, are constantly renegotiated along a feedback loop where discourses enable particular practices, which are then reinterpreted into discursive patterns.

Second, in order to pinpoint precisely where such agency occurs and trace how modified practices are negotiated into discourse, Neumann consciously chooses for his study a smaller scale in time and space than Doty does in hers(2003). In his Millennium article, he describes the practical innovations and negotiations surrounding the creation of the Barents Sea Region as a political entity, wherein local officials in Norway became authorized to carry out diplomatic practices usually reserved solely for officials within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Though Neumann, like Doty, sees the exercise of power in the accumulation of everyday practice, still his interest in tracing the evolution of discourse within a relatively narrow time-frame leads him to stop the feedback loop at some appropriate point rather than recursively deconstruct discourses and practices “all the way down.” As a result, he
is more likely to identify specific institutions as the accumulation of past practices and grant the officials within these institutions the kind of agency that Oren grants them.

Given my own theoretical predispositions, I find it difficult to disagree with Neumann’s explication of method, and only wish I had his sophisticated understanding of the theoretical literature. Still, I wonder if Neumann has drawn the boundaries around his discourse analyses too narrowly. Both in this account of diplomatic practices in Norway, as well as in his larger work on Russian national identity, Neumann stays focused on the discourses and practices directly relevant to his subject matter, without the rich layering that makes Doty’s work so engaging. (See Iver Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe: A Study in Identity and International Relations*. London: Routledge, 1996) Selected excursions outside these boundaries to examine, say, the importance of gender in interpreting Russia’s relation with the West in the nineteenth century, might have identify potential sources of disruption and illuminated better why certain practices and discourses are less susceptible to change than others.

To conclude, I want to say I have learned enormously from each of these contributions. They demonstrate the need for all of us to consider critically the historical contingencies and relations of power behind our own discipline’s most cherished assumptions and behind the assumptions, norms and identities of the discourses we study, lest we end up unconsciously reinforcing practices we may not condone. Beyond that, I endorse Neumann’s respect for pluralism in delineating the relation between discourse and material practice (see Neumann, 2003). Constructivism may go “all the way down,” or nearly so, but scholars may choose to draw this line in different places depending on the issues they want to explore.