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The Legacies and Trajectories of Poststructuralism

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Book reviewed:

The Edinburgh Companion to Poststructuralism,
Benoît Dillet, Iain MacKenzie, Robert Porter (eds.) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 201X), xiii + 546 pp., ISBN: 978-0748641222

The editors of *The Edinburgh Companion to Poststructuralism* succeed admirably at the unenviable task they set themselves of delivering both an accessible introduction to poststructuralism, comprising a focus on its origins, variants, applications, and receptions, and a collection of papers sure to pique the interest of those more familiar with the tradition. The book is structured along thematic lines, allowing new and well-versed readers alike to identify sections of particular interest with ease, and the papers collected hail from a wide variety of scholarly and practitioner backgrounds, setting the volume up well for a meaningfully interdisciplinary reception.

Notwithstanding this breadth, the chapters collected in *The Edinburgh Companion to Poststructuralism* share a series of core foci and concerns. One of the most important of these, in my view, relates to the question of the constructed nature of subjectivity. In different but mutually complementary ways, the chapters authored by Simon Lumsden, Caroline Williams, Nathan Widder, Conn Holohan and Michael A. Peters explore how the persistence of an ‘unresolved subject’ is crucial to the deconstructive, genealogical, and schizo-analytical (to name the most prominent, but by no means only) traditions populating the poststructuralist landscape. Taken together, their contributions underline the range of ways in which problematising the cogito remains an urgent endeavour in the critique of onto-politics which underpins poststructuralist ethics and politics.

This produced and producing subject is explored in many sections of the volume in terms of the politics and possibilities of a further core theme: desire. Taking the contributions of Widder, Holohan, Peters and George Sotiropoulos together, a contrast emerges between, on the one hand, a Lacanian/Žižekian framing of desire understood as emanating from an irresolvable lack, and, on the other, a Deleuzo-Guattarian account in which desire is associated with a vitalistic, affirmatory impulse animated by an immanent difference which is key to the possibility of emancipatory politics. Amongst other points, what these chapters collectively draw into focus for me is the question of whether desire should be celebrated as creative or, rather, treated with caution as a form of licence. In other words, the question is whether desire should be read as a drive or force by means of which radical change might be realised, or whether such a reading is insufficiently mindful of the extent to which the objects of any particular desire, perhaps even desire itself, are shot-through with acquisitive and entitled tendencies of the privileged subject of contemporary capitalism, something which speaks more of licence than emancipation.

Perhaps most importantly, the book sustains a keen focus on the question of the praxiological possibilities associated with specific figures and schools of thought central to

the poststructuralist canon. Tackling head-on the frequently levelled charges of political quietism and (unwitting) collusion with the forces of neo-liberal ideology and control, the chapters by Sotiropoulos and Corinne Enaudeau in particular do an admirable job of demonstrating the various ways in which the poststructuralist tradition has sought to challenge the prevailing order in conceptual and practical ways. Just as importantly, they also emphasise that the task of seeking concrete radical change only becomes ever more urgent as prevailing regimes of power become further consolidated as time passes. Rather than shying away from the aporias undergirding the possibility of a justice conceptualised in, and as, flux, these authors push the debate forward by exploring the possibilities for forms of resistance and intervention emanating from post-foundational vantage points.

Central to this conceptualisation of resistance is the notion of play, another theme of note in *The Edinburgh Companion to Poststructuralism*. In a manner that inherits from Nietzsche's conceptualisation of the 'keeping in play', several of the authors – in particular Lumsden, Nicole Anderson, Tara Puri, and Véronique Bergen – emphasise the significance of play for the poststructuralist project and its political possibilities. Importantly, the notion operates in their discussions not in the sense of game-play but rather as a means by which to express a commitment to fluidity and flux – of signifiers, identities, concepts, and meanings – in the construction and exercise of philosophical and political action.

Importantly, the editors, and indeed authors, are mindful both to emphasise the problematic character of 'poststructuralism' as a label attached to philosophers whose projects differ from one another perhaps as much as they converge, and to trace faithfully the tradition's indebtedness to a range of forms of thought and practice which either preceded it or with which it was contemporaneous. The indissociability of, or at least enduring overlap between, structuralism and poststructuralism is explored by several authors, including Lumsden, Craig Lundy, John W. Philipps, Caroline Williams, and Bergen, as well as by the editors themselves. Similarly, the relationship between the feminist interventions of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva are woven into many chapters, some dedicated specifically to these figures (Zoë Brigley Thompson, Puri, and Yvette Russell), others dealing with broader thematic or conceptual questions (Bergen, Simon Choat, and Sarah Edge). The editors have thereby provided a helpful counter-steer to all-too-familiar barebones accounts which present poststructuralism as emanating almost exclusively from male philosophers and belonging to a masculinised series of concerns and inheritances. The exploration of the relationship between postcolonial thought and poststructuralism is somewhat less well developed, with only two chapters (Paul Bowman and, more substantively, Caroline Rooney) exploring this complex interrelation in any depth. Further examination of the intersections and tensions between these traditions would have been politically and conceptually fruitful in my view. The volume also connects the more abstract dimensions of poststructuralism to concrete cultural sites and forms, including photography (Edge), film (Holohan), and the space of the museum (Anne Cutler), providing substantive accounts of its significance beyond formal academic spheres.

The editors close the volume by emphasising the possibilities for a revival of poststructuralism, something which is necessitated by its 'submergence' or 'taming' in the academy in recent years and its (perceived) 'recuperation' within prevailing power relations. While I am not sure, in my own field of International Relations at least, that the popularity and edge of poststructuralism have diminished to the degree they suggest, I fully endorse the editors' project of revivifying it towards a renewed activism in the interrelated spheres of academic, social, economic, and political life.

About the author

Aggie Hirst is Lecturer in International Politics at City University London. Her research interests span international and political theory, violence and war(gaming), and post-9/11 US foreign policy. She is author of *Leo Strauss and the Invasion of Iraq: Encountering the Abyss* (Routledge, 2013).