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AN ONTO-EPISTEMOLOGICAL CRITICISM OF POST-STRUCTURALISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN THE LIGHT OF CRITICAL REALISM

EMRE GÜNDOĞDU
egundogdu@gelisim.edu.tr
Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Istanbul Gelisim University (Türkiye). He is also a member of the Istanbul Gelisim University Political and Social Research Application and Research Center (IGUSAM). His academic research primarily focuses on international relations theory and international security. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6114-4484

Abstract

The aim of this study is to criticize the use of "post-structuralism" as a theory of international relations in the light of "critical realism". In the study, the scientific convenience of the use of post-structuralist analysis in international relations is discussed under critical realism's methodology. In this context, international relations research conducted within the framework of post-structuralism is criticized on the basis of "judgmental rationality" because it does not have a scientific framework suitable for testing. Contrary to the discourse reductionist stance of post-structuralism, the importance of "generative mechanisms" as a methodological tool in international relations is also revealed. Finally, it is emphasized that the anti-causal approach of post-structuralism is not suitable for the field of international relations, because cause-effect relationships exist in international relations, but the fact that generative mechanisms do not always create regularity among social phenomena leads to the erroneous belief that causal processes do not exist. The study found that international relations cannot be reduced to political discourses. There are generative mechanisms that lead to cause-effect relationships regardless of the discourses in international relations, and these relationships can be identified through judgmental rationality.

Keywords

Critical realism, post-structuralism in international relations, judgmental rationality, generative mechanism, causality.

Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo é criticar o uso do "pós-estruturalismo" como uma teoria das relações internacionais à luz do "realismo crítico". No estudo, discute-se a adequação científica da utilização da análise pós-estruturalista nas relações internacionais a partir da metodologia do realismo crítico. Nesse sentido, as pesquisas em relações internacionais desenvolvidas no âmbito do pós-estruturalismo são criticadas com base na "racionalidade judicativa", uma vez que não possuem um arcabouço científico adequado para a testabilidade. Em contraste com a postura reducionista do discurso adotada pelo pós-estruturalismo, evidencia-se também a importância dos "mecanismos gerativos" como ferramenta metodológica nas relações internacionais. Por fim, enfatiza-se que a abordagem anticausal do pós-estruturalismo não é adequada ao campo das relações internacionais, pois relações de causa e efeito existem nesse domínio; contudo, o fato de que os mecanismos gerativos nem sempre produzem regularidade entre os fenômenos sociais conduz à crença equivocada de que processos causais não existem. O estudo conclui que as relações internacionais não podem ser reduzidas a discursos

políticos. Existem mecanismos gerativos que produzem relações de causa e efeito independentemente dos discursos nas relações internacionais, e tais relações podem ser identificadas por meio da racionalidade judicativa.

Palavras-Chave

Realismo crítico, pós-estruturalismo nas relações internacionais, racionalidade jurisdicional, mecanismo generativo, causalidade.

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Introduction

There are four main themes on the agenda of scholarly objections underlying various social theory challenges to mainstream theories of international relations. The first criticism impresses the restrictions of the positivist or empiricist approach in examining politics. The second criticism emphasizes social, historical, and cultural themes in the process by which knowledge is constructed, rather than an epistemological understanding based on rationalism or sense data. The third critism declines the tracing of objective knowledge beyond historical context and social practice as unnecessary. The fourth criticism underlines the insight that reality is constructed through language (George, 1989, p. 272). Post-structuralism brings together social theory and international relations theory, and post-structuralist ontology is based on language. In post-structuralism, language is not treated as a simple mirror of reality. It emphasizes that language constitutes social reality and that there is no social reality independent of language. What is presented in discourse as "real," "eternal," or "universal" is actually considered the imposition of a particular discursive order (Aydın-Düzgit, 2015, pp.155-156).

The methodological basis of this study, which opens the discussion to the use of post-structuralism as an international relations theory, is provided by the philosophical approach put forward by critical realism on the ontological and epistemological levels. At this point, the study firstly reveals that post-structuralism is not a theoretical framework that can be used as a tool to reach a scientific judgment in terms of the necessity of developing the tools and criteria to be used in explaining the relationships between phenomena. Facts can only be interpreted and defined with the help of hypotheses and theories (Jervis, 1968, p. 457), and the need for theory is inevitable as it is a measure of deciding which data to find among the infinite mass of data and which type of relationships to investigate (Arı, 2018, p. 24). According to Bhaskar (2008, pp. 11-12), science cannot be imagined without transitive objects (scientific premises). Transitive objects of knowledge include "the facts and theories, paradigms and models, research methods and techniques" predetermined for a particular scientific school. Bhaskar (2008, p. 138) states that humans never create knowledge; they merely modify it with their cognitive frameworks. What needs to be modified must first be obtained. In this respect, post-structuralism is not a theory that contains various hypotheses with which to analyze discourses and is not suitable for improvement on the basis of the principle of falsifiability.

Secondly, the study criticizes post-structuralism for ignoring that change and developments are the result of the interaction of mechanisms with certain characteristics. Post-structuralism does not accept the ontological existence of observable or unobservable mechanisms in action and that these (physical, social, psychological or conceptual) shape the phenomena, but makes discourse its own cause. As a leading figure in post-structuralism, Derrida asserted that supposedly stable ontological categories - such as "being, essence, existence, cause, origin, substance, subject, and truth" - are basically epistemological constructs inherited from generations of thinkers. In this respect, post-structuralism cannot offer a clear opposing ontology to critical realism. On the contrary, poststructuralism calls ontology into question by arguing that any ontology is a result of epistemology which is already our socially constructed ways of knowing (Dixon and Jones, 2004, pp. 80-83).

Scientific reality can be defined as a form of relationship between dependent and independent variables in a certain interaction process, which can be repeated more than once in a deterministic or probabilistic sense and is believed to be repeated in the future. Theory is a system that allows us to explain and describe the relationships between facts in a branch of science and to make predictions about the future (Arı, 2018, pp. 7-8). In this respect, thirdly, the study criticizes post-structuralism for lacking causality, as it has a methodology that ignores a theoretical understanding that reveals recurring relationships as an expected feature of a theory. Because, rather than seeking causal relationships and underlying explanatory structures, post-structuralism does not consider reality itself as the object of study; rather, it focuses merely on representations (Boonstra and Rauws, 2021, p. 309). In this respect, this study, which engages in a meta-theoretical inquiry, critically examines the reduction of the field of international relations to representations grounded in subjective discourses.

Critical Realism

Critical realism, as proposed by Bhaskar, is a philosophy of science that argues that the social sciences can be studied in the same way as the natural sciences. Bhaskar believes there is a "methodological unity" between the social and natural sciences, but he also emphasizes the need to develop an alternative scientific approach to positivism (Yalvaç, 2010, p. 5). Bhaskar comes close to positivism in that he opposes the arbitrary, random and irrational nature of scientific progress and its philosophical idealism, as put forward by Thomas Kuhn, and argues that the objects on which scientific assumptions are based have a reality independent of the subject and that it is possible to discover this reality. Critical realism demonstrates that it is possible to achieve scientific knowledge in society, just as it is in the natural sciences. On the other hand, by suggesting for scientific knowledge of causality and unobservable structures, critical realism stands in opposition to positivists like Karl Popper and Imre Lakatos, who consider this principle metaphysical and do not consider it a matter of knowledge (Ülman et al., 2011, p. 26).

Critical realism differs from the ontology of post-positivism as well as positivism. Critical realism suggests a structural understanding of social ontology defined in terms of material relations, unlike post-structuralist, post-modern, hermeneutic and constructivist international relations theories that suggest a linguistic, discursive or interpretative

understanding of reality. According to positivists, reality is defined by sensations; for post-positivist theorists, reality has an intersubjective nature and is defined through language/discourse. In both approaches, being present is associated with "being sensed or spoken about." Because of the priority given to the subject (human) as the basis of reality, Bhaskar characterizes both positivism and post-positivism as "anthropocentric," distinguishing these approaches from the ontological realism of critical realism, which refers to a reality existing outside of the human being (Yalvaç, 2010, pp. 5-6).

According to critical realism, nature has causal structures and generative mechanisms that are independent of the regularity of events. Likewise, events emerge independently of the experiences through which they are comprehended. Just as events become distinct from the experiences through which they are apprehended as realities, structures and mechanisms become distinct from the regularities of events they generate. In this respect, mechanisms, events, and experiences comprise overlapping domains of reality: "domains of the *real*, the *actual* and the *empirical*" (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 46). The empirical domain is pertinent to experiments and observable facts; the actual domain embraces events and experiences; and the real domain includes underlying structures and generative mechanisms that bring on those events and experiences. At this juncture, Bhaskar's view rests on his central critique of the empiricist tradition - which confines the multi-layered nature of reality to a single dimension - and of transcendental idealism, which regards unseen mechanisms as inherently unknowable. Both traditions have a one-dimensional and superficial conception of reality, whereas according to Bhaskar, reality is not one-dimensional (Türk, 2012, p. 195). Bhaskar also argues that the main deficit of the Humean comprehension of law lies in its association of laws with closed systems - systems in which events occur simultaneously. Consequently, it sould be noted that neither the empirical validation nor the practical application of our knowledge can be maintained in the context of open systems. However, when open systems are taken into account, laws can still possess universality if they are understood in a non-empirical sense - that is, if the impact of generative mechanisms and structures are identified independently of any specific pattern of events (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 3).

According to Bhaskar, the existence of causality or generative mechanisms does not necessarily result in an event. Therefore, grasping reality simply by basing it on cause-effect relationships and purely concrete events, would mean consuming reality in the domain of the actual. Bhaskar emphasizes that independent elements, thought to be cause and effect, are assumed to exist within a closed system, and suggests that the concept of "differentiated reality" can transcend the fiction of a closed system. Furthermore, by emphasizing the inexhaustibility of that reality in the domain of the actual, he demonstrates that an open system can also possess causal laws. At this point, causal laws should be considered and analyzed as "tendencies." The lack of knowledge of causal laws as tendencies does not mean they do not exist (Türk, 2012, pp. 196-197).

From the perspective of critical realism, interrelated concepts such as "ontological realism," "generative mechanisms," and "judgmental rationality" play a key role in understanding reality. Ontological realism argues that facts exist in both the natural and social worlds, independently (in the natural world) or relatively independently (in the social world) of what we know about them. Judgmental rationality requires the ability to make judgments about competing or controversial epistemic explanations of reality and

to develop the tools and criteria necessary to arrive at reasonable and accurate explanations of phenomena. Judgmental rationality argues that there are explanatory criteria for social facts, some of which are more reasonable than others, and therefore not all of which are equal (Quraishi et al., 2022, pp. 25-26). A generative mechanism is defined as a non-empirical but real entity that explains why observable events occur. Mechanisms can often be understood indirectly through analytical work (theory building) (Blom and Moren, 2011, p. 60).

Judgmental Rationality and Post-Structuralism in International Relations

Post-structuralism, the post-modern version of constructivism, emphasizes the "linguistic construction" and clearly departs from critical realism by asserting an epistemic break with modernism. Thus, social science is identified with a usage of discourse analysis that challenges the view of causality and allows for the coexistence of multiple interpretations of social facts, each carrying its own results (Bobulescu, 2011, p. 60). Conversely, critical realism suggests that not all explanations hold equal value; rather, there are generally objective grounds for opting one model over another. Judgmental rationality tehereby denotes the capacity of researchers to select viable methods and to evaluate competing explanations through reason and evidence (Brunson et al., 2025, pp. 14-15).

Judgmental rationality is based on the principle of falsification, as introduced by Popper, and this principle is an important way of approaching epistemology. Accordingly, we cannot know that things are true, only that things are not true. Critical realism is based on an adapted version of this falsificationism. In this respect, the theory with the highest explanatory power is selected from among rival theories that try to explain the same phenomenon by falsifying the other theories in terms of their inadequacies (Interdisciplinary Phase, 2023). At this point, it should be noted that the hallmark of poststructuralist analyses is their lack of falsifiability. In terms of the link established between discourses and events, the lack of a criterion for determining at what point discourses do not constitute reality leads to the theory appearing consistent with observations in all cases, which indicates that the theory is designed to support observations in all cases.

Judgmental rationality holds that the meaningfulness of knowledge depends on the meaningfulness of what it refers to - unlike the poststructuralist view that only knowledge is meaningful while the world itself lacks inherent meaning. The importance of knowledge, therefore, originates not merely from epistemological interpretation but from the structure of reality. Knowledge is not just the output of human actions; it also reflects how these actions are positioned within deeper ontological structures. This stance posits the existence of enduring relationships that can be examined and understood. Epistemic relativism recognizes that our knowledge may not indefectibly correspond to reality. However, critical realism asserts that there are rational foundations for preferring certain explanations over others - foundations that originate not from the nature of knowledge itself, but from the nature of the world that knowledge seeks to identify. Judgmental rationality posits that there are valid reasons to prefer some explanations over others depending on initiatives to explain what is happening in the world (Joseph, 2014).

Scientific development consists of the transformation of social products, which are predetermined elements of knowledge that can be regarded as Aristotelian material causes. Certain implications can be derived from this understanding. First, humans never construct their knowledge from scratch. A given product always remains as a social transmission that they must reproduce themselves. Humans never create knowledge; they merely modify it with their cognitive frameworks. Second, in order for something to be modified, it must first be attained. What is attained always takes the form of a combination of both theoretical and empirical insights; therefore, knowledge cannot be confined to individual sensory experience. Science, consequently, is a collective initiative that both precedes and transcends any given generation of scientists or moment of awareness. Its purpose is to reveal knowledge of objectively existing and causally effective mechanisms of nature. Knowledge without premises is inconceivable (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 138).

Conversely, post-structuralism is not able to present an alternative refererence point or framework, as it lacks any independent ontological or epistemological foundation upon which such a reference point could be constructed. Thus, poststructuralism does not offer a "guide" to global political developments because it lacks secure epistemic foundations. While modernists worry about the possibility of infinite interpretation without a transcendent standard to which everyone must adhere, postmodernists point out that everything assumed to be true is open to problematization (Connolly, 2002, pp. 56-61).

Post-structuralist approaches reject master narratives and do not privilege a single narrative (Mease, 2017, p. 17). Post-structuralists incite scholars to adopt a critical standpoint toward universal narratives that intend to convey an objective understanding of the reality, as such narratives are deeply formed by prior assumptions about truth and are often promoted by dominant power structures. Consequently, post-structuralists engage in an evidently critical position toward any theoretical framework that alleges to identify objective facts, suggesting instead that truth and knowledge are inherently subjective constructs that are produced through discourse rather than discovered as pre-existing realities (Mc Morrow, 2018). From the viewpoint of post-structuralism, if reality forms the conditions of human existence, and if the construction of that reality hinges on a particular mode of knowing (episteme) and its associated power relations, then social life is ultimately shaped by power rather than by reality as defined by Platon or Kant. In connection with this view, Habermas states that post-structuralists cannot make an inference about what is just or unjust (Koch, 1993, p. 341).

Post-structuralists argue that abandoning rationalist ontology and embracing an anti-foundationalist epistemology drags us towards a multifaceted analysis of the world. But the fact that an anti-foundationalist theory like post-structuralism breaks with the possibility and desirability of truth contained in the understanding of theory and knowledge represents a move into the world of uncertainty and relativity according to the rationalist and realist view (Hansen, 1997, p. 384). Although accessing reality is mediated through paradigms, theories, concepts, and methodologies, these intellectual instruments do not constitute reality itself but help to uncover aspects of it. A basic principle of critical realism holds that the intransitive objects are independent of our understanding of them. While our knowledge of reality is historically conditional - subject to modifications in epistemes, theoretical frameworks, and methodological approaches -

the underlying basis that such knowledge seeks to comprehend remains constant (Albert et al., 2020, p. 3).

Critical realists highlights a fundamental ontological distinction between the reality of worlds and the knowledge produced about those worlds. Within critical realism, any theory that fails to respect this difference is accused of the epistemic fallacy of reducing or confusing an (intransitive) explanation of the world with the world itself (Willmott, 2005, p. 752). According to Bhaskar (2008, pp. 26-27), this epistemic fallacy stems from the view that statements about existence can be reduced to or analyzed in terms of statements about knowledge; that is, ontological questions can be erroneously translated into epistemological terms.

From a post-structuralist perspective, grasping international politics relies on "abstraction, representation, and interpretation". When we write or speak about "anarchy," "the Cold War," "gendered power relations," "globalization," "humanitarian intervention," and so on, we engage in representation. Even the most "objective" theory cannot escape the need for interpretation (Campbell and Bleiker, 2016, p. 223). In post-structuralist stance, any certain perspective can not claim supremacy over others. The view of an absolute or universal truth is declined; instead, what exists is a plurality of competing interpretations (Devetak, 2005, pp. 163-164). Post-structuralists argue, for instance, that what is perceived as a threat cannot be objectively determined or measured. Rather, the perception of threat is inherently interpretive, formed by discourse and context. Consequently, regarding an issue or an actor as a security threat should not be apprehended as an objective statement of fact, but as a subjective claim that represents particular values, interests, and power relations. According to post-structuralists, there is no objective answer to the questions: *"Are troops crossing the border an aggressive attack, a liberation, or maybe part of a peacekeeping operation? Was Crimea in 2014 annexed by or reunited with Russia?"* (Baumann, 2022, p. 9). Contrary to this approach, the concept of judgmental rationality, which offers valid reasons for preferring some explanations over others, develops an understanding that, while not emphasizing absolute truth, requires the existence of falsifiable propositions on the path to truth.

The judgmental rationality can be explained through such an example: Peace in Europe is a reality, and various competing explanations can be offered. For example, one might offer "reasons" such as states sharing a common interest in forming a united front against a common enemy, as in NATO. But as was experienced during the Soviet Union's intervention in Hungary in 1956, states -even allies- can use violence against each other. It could also be argued that the economic ties between capitalist states would prevent war; but such arguments weakened with the Second World War. Although there have been institutionalist views that various international or supranational institutions that bring states together will prevent war, institutions may remain dysfunctional in cases where peaceful relations do not precede institutions. Some international organizations may have a clear intention of peace, but others, not primarily oriented toward preventing war, merely help resolve the many problematic conflicts of interest that can foster suspicion and hostility. However, war can flare up when the institutions supposed to provide the tools for peaceful conflict resolution fail. While the motivation driving states in Europe toward peace appears to be membership in a common international

organization, it should not be overlooked that the underlying motivation for European Community membership is, in essence, the criterion of democracy. It is well known that individual autonomy and a pluralistic approach in democracies foster the formation of transnational connections among individuals, pressure groups, and state institutions. In this respect, democracy stands out as a more powerful explanatory variable for peace (as put forward by the democratic peace theory) compared to other variables mentioned above (Russett and Antholis, 1992, pp. 415-416; Russett, 1994, pp. 84-87). The importance of this example from the standpoint of critical realism is that the tools of knowledge (theories) that represent reality more imperfectly play an important role on the way to reaching a theory that is as close to reality as possible, and at the same time, they are not of equal value to each other. According to critical realism, knowledge refers to an objective reality and represents it, no matter how imperfectly it may be (Brunson et al., 2025, p. 5). Abandoning the effort to get as close to reality as possible, based on the fact that perfect knowledge cannot be achieved, halts scientific progress.

Generative Mechanisms and Post-structuralism in International Relations

Critical realism is principally concerned with uncovering explanatory mechanisms that account for social facts by inspecting what individuals are capable of obtaining within the structural contexts that condition their actions (Stutchbury, 2022, p. 114). Critical realism assert that reality is ontologically stratified and directed by underlying, non-empirical laws, wherein a multiplicity of mechanisms and structures operate simultaneously (Willmott, 2005, p. 752). From this viewpoint, change emerges through the interplay between relatively enduring mechanisms and the particular properties or causal powers inherent within them. These mechanisms are regarded to exist independently of human cognition or linguistic representation. Moreover, they are not pertain to the physical domain; rather, they may be regarded as social, psychological, or conceptual forms and may be either empirically observable or remain beyond direct observation. Through their interactions, mechanisms produce the events and facts that constitute reality, only a subset of which are empirically observable. Consequently, a mechanism may be understood as a structure with interrelated components endowed with specific forces, powers, or tendencies that account for its capacity to generate particular consequences (Mingers and Standing, 2017, pp. 175-176).

In contrast to the post-structuralist approach's epistemological assumption that knowledge is based on cultural, historical and ideological contexts and its ontological understanding that considers reality as a social construction that gains meaning only within a framework of communication and discourse (Schieder and Spindler, 2014, p. 7), critical realism defends the ontological stance that the reality exists independently of our linguistic structures. Critical realism does not reject the reality of discourses. However, it argues that we can comprehend the social reality if we identify the active structures that generate these discourses (Molinari, 2024, p. 524).

Due to the fact that generative mechanisms embedded within objects and structures are typically unobservable, it is necessary to identify them through processes of abstract and theoretical investigation. For instance, while one may empirically observe buyers and

sellers bargaining on prices and products, the underlying market mechanism that enables such relations remains unseen. Although the mechanism itself is both unobservable and non-deterministic, its impacts are possible to observe empirically, thereby allowing researchers to formulate explanatory accounts of its running (Bygstad et al., 2016, p. 84).

For example, Waltz argues that political systems consist of a range of interacting units and structural features that allows these interacting units to be regarded as a unified whole. (Barkdull, 1995, p. 670) and therefore he brought a structuralist perspective to the theory of international relations. Waltz's theory was inspired by microeconomic theory, which explains how order emerges spontaneously through the self-interested actions of individuals and firms. Accordingly, a decentralized economic market emerges spontaneously and without intention. The market emerges from the actions of distinct entities -individuals and firms- whose goals are not aimed at establishing order, but at pursuing their own internally defined interests by whatever means available. Units act individually for their own sake. The combination of similar units creates a structure that effects and restricts other ones. Once formed, the market becomes a force unto itself, beyond the control of its constituent units. As a factor intervening between units and the consequences they generate, the market conditions their calculations, behaviors, and interactions. A market restrains its constituent units from taking certain actions and directs them to take other actions. Created by self-governing, interacting economic agents, the market selects actions based on their consequences. While the market rewards some units with high profits, it also drives others into bankruptcy (Waltz, 1979, pp. 89-91).

At this point, two fundamental assumptions of structural realism, anarchy and rationality, stand out. Waltz does not hold that states always behave rationally, but his view must assume that if states fail to adjust their behavior in accordance with the system's requirements, they will be penalized by the system itself. The rational-state assumption is central to the entire project of structural realism, as work in this direction involves either an assumption of rationality or an evolutionary mechanism that eliminates states exhibiting irrational behavior (Schmidt and Wight, 2023, p. 159). The discipline of international relations has a longstanding tradition of classifying the distribution of power in terms of the number and relative significance of the principal actors - such as "unipolar, bipolar, multipolar, or dispersed" configurations. This conception parallels the way economists conceptualize market structures as monopolistic, duopolistic, oligopolistic, or competitive. Structure, in this sense, is analytically different from process, which is associated with the patterns of allocation, negotiation, and bargaining behavior that occur within a given power configuration. To draw an analogy with the game of poker, process-related analysis concerns itself with how players strategically play the hands they are dealt, whereas structural analysis focuses on how the cards are distributed at the beginning of the game (Keohane and Nye, 2012, p. 17-18). Under this structural condition, actors will run the risk of incurring high costs to the extent that they "behave post-structuralistly" by denying the existence of an optimal move with the cards they hold.

Some theorists regard systems less as concrete entities and more as classificatory tools for systematizing knowledge about international relations. From this standpoint, one may

refer to an international political, economic or a social system. Systems, therefore, are understood as analytical constructs or intellectual models that help the conceptualization of international phenomena. Consequently, some scholars express skepticism toward regarding a system as a concrete entity equipped with intrinsic properties. Critics drawing on post-positivist or interpretivist stances suggest that reifying such abstractions - that is, attributing real existence to conceptual categories like "the system" - is a type of a methodological fallacy. Neo-structuralist theorists criticize of realism's state-centric and rationalist conception of structure and instead focus on how global processes interact with both state and societal dynamics (Viotti and Kauppi, 2012, pp. 54; 208-209). For instance, Keohane and Nye (2015, pp. 94-96) regard systems as comprising two interrelated dimensions - structure and process - and define "process" as the patterns of interaction through which units relate to one another. They stress that variables such as the degree of international interdependence or the extent of institutionalization of international norms and rules do not vary according to the domestic characteristics of individual states. In other words, these factors remain independent of unit-level attributes, such as the nature of domestic political processes or the type of economic system - whether capitalist or socialist - adopted by a state. In contrast to Waltz's framework, such variables are not considered unit-level factors but rather features of the systemic domain. For Keohane and Nye, concepts such as the effects of increasing cross-governmental linkages on behavior and communication and the role of institutions and values are essential components of systems-thinking in international relations.

In light of the richness of views in mainstream international relations theories, it can be seen that there are dozens of mechanisms that limit human political activity, both on a conceptual and empirical level. Structures based on power relations between actors, such as balance of power and bipolarity, and systems such as security dilemma, democratic peace and interdependence between actors are each a generative mechanism that conditions actor actions. In poststructuralism, analysis is based on discourse, not on a structure; the action of the actor who puts forth the discourse is associated with its discourse. For example, post-structuralists consider security policies as one of the most important practices through which states construct their identities, rather than seeing them as strategies to defend a state or an alliance of states. In security matters, the enemy is defined within security discourses. According to this view, while security is essential for the state, this necessity does not stem from the need to protect states from external threats, as in the traditional understanding. Post-structuralists argue that the state's identity is tied to threats and that a sense of insecurity is necessary for state formation (Hansen, 1997, pp. 374-375). Traditional international relations theories tend to view foreign policy as the (pre-given) responses of states to the outside world. Post-structuralists, however, do not view foreign policy as the actions of the state because reject the assumption that the state is ontologically prior to politics. Accordingly, foreign policy is not the reaction of a pre-existing subject, but the process through which a certain form of subjectivity is consistently reproduced (Ballbach, 2015, pp. 142). As a requirement of the critical realist understanding of science, on the contrary, it is necessary to focus on the structural conditions of all intellectual phenomena such as insecurity, threat, identity or discourse, rather than trying to derive them from each other in a tautological manner. It is the only way to identify the irrational narratives that fuel flawed foreign policies with reference to structure.

Decision makers' usage of knowledge for action within the real world creates feedback depending on the degree of certainty of that knowledge. The process of learning is often most evident when errors emerge, as wrong beliefs uncover the constraints imposed by reality. For example, an individual may suppose that they can move a large rock with their bare hands, however empirical engagement with the world would eventually falsify this belief. This perspective thus avoids the relativism inherent in radical forms of social constructionism, which suggest that reality can only be understood as an intellectual or discursive construction and, consequently, that inquiry is limited to the study of subjective or individualized realities (Brunson et al., 2025, pp. 5-6).

Causality and Post-structuralism in International Relations

Hermeneutic stance suggest that the social world is constructed through shared meanings and interpretive practices, and therefore prioritize understanding over causal explanation. Therefore, establishing causal relationships between phenomena is impossible in the interpretive tradition (Marsh and Furlong, 2010, p. 20). Critical realism, while acknowledging the significance of accurate description, asserts that the main purpose of research is to explain facts by identifying the underlying processes and mechanisms that generate them under specific enabling conditions. In other words, critical realism have the aim of elucidating causality through the running of mechanisms and processes rather than through the observation of regular, predictable covariation (Brunson et al., 2025, p. 9). Based on his view of different ontological levels (real, actual, and empirical), Bhaskar contends that the lack of empirical regularities does not necessarily denote the absence of real or necessary causes running at a deeper ontological level.According to him, causality does not depend on regularities or observability (Kurki, 2009, p. 167). In post-modern approaches, on the contrary, the causal and general regularities of historical development lose their importance and there is a tendency to highlight the particular and the exceptional ones (Yalvaç, 2011, p. 75). Particular and exceptional ones are the basis of the post-structuralist view, which concludes that causality does not exist because general regularity is often absent.

According to Bhaskar (2008, pp. 23-24), causal laws continue to operate normally under conditions that can be described as "open," where no regular sequence of events emerges. Discovered causal laws are categorically independent of the patterns of events produced. The categorical independence of causal laws and event patterns means that the laws continue to operate in open systems where events do not form a continuous pattern. As Bhaskar (2008, pp. 36-37) points out, it is important to remember that a direct correspondence between a causal law and the sequence of events exists only under closed conditions. It is only in the laboratory that permanent natural mechanisms become truly explicit and empirically accessible to humans. In other words, a direct correspondence between a causal law and the sequence of events occurs only under closed conditions.

If the system is open, regularity may not emerge due to the presence of "balancing factors" or "opposing causes." It is a failure to think of the effects of a tendency in the context of their occurrence. In other words, it is a mistake to assume that when a tendency is active, the effect must occur. It is a mistake to assume that when no effect

of a certain type occurs, nothing can be active (Bhaskar, 2008, pp. 88-90). Despite the deep mutual lack of trust, the protracted security dilemmas, the uncertainty in the intentions of both sides, the long history of wars, and the impulsive and unstable relations between the two countries, the credibility of a nuclear deterrent relationship between India and Pakistan based on their assured strike capabilities and doctrinal stances has been accepted by both South Asian rivals. Deterrence has altered the strategic landscape in South Asia, eliminated the possibility of all-out war, reduced the consequences of conventional military conflicts, and finally, limited strategic competition to crises of very small and insignificant intensity (Khan and Ahsan, 2016, pp. 53-54). In this example, the security dilemma mechanism is balanced by the deterrence mechanism, and the necessity of the mechanisms to result in an incident is eliminated. Under open conditions, such networks of relationships that emerge as a result of the clash of opposing causes seem to support the post-structuralist perspective that is reluctant to establish causal relationships between phenomena. However, in the example given, the reason why regularity does not emerge in the deterministic sense is not because the tendencies do not exist but because they balance each other.

A and *B* are complex outcomes shaped by multiple forces, and their interactions are enabled by many other conditions that are significant however may not be easily noticed. But this is still causality, the production of change; it is just more multifaceted and complex. Post-structuralists, while they may want to avoid the concept of causality, repeatedly explain how certain changes or effects come about, unwittingly offering causal explanations. For example, after addressing the performativity (i.e., causal power) of discourse, they explain how racism emerges - that is, why it happens. Post-structuralists argue that they only examine the "how" of power, not the "why," as if the two are separable. Therefore, many post-structuralists think of they can abandon the causality (Sayer, 2012, p. 181).

The concepts of emergence and causal powers play a significant role in Bhaskar's explanation of the ontological distinction that underpins his philosophy of critical realism. Emergence is the formation of a thing's existence through (without reduction to) the existence of things outside of itself. Each entity emerges thanks to the causal power of the preceding entity that created it, maintains its specific power within its own domain of reality, and forms the basis for the emergence of entities in subsequent domains (Karagöz, 2024, p. 91). What these manifestations mean for international relations is that international politics cannot be interpreted anthropocentrically and causality cannot be abandoned. The international policy to be pursued can be inferred from the discourse of a head of state or government officials, but the relevant policy cannot be reduced to their discourses. A relationship can be established between North Korea's dictatorial regime and its foreign policy, but an argument that Kim Jong-Un's discourse has produced a new foreign policy reality does not contribute to international relations theory. The key is to focus on the structural causes underlying these discourses. Political leaders do not construct reality; but the success of their discourses is tested by reference to political reality. The reason for this is that actors receive feedback (reward or punishment) based on whether their discourses point to ideas that align with the rules of reality. At this point, Sayer's (2012, p. 182) reference to Marx is noteworthy: *"We act on nature as one of its own forces. Hence, freedom is not a matter of disengagement from causation (freedom from necessity), but rather a mobilisation of powers in ways that*

take advantage of contingencies. Disengagement from causal powers and their exer cise would leave us like a car whose gearbox had stuck in neutral-unable to move".

Critical realism's standpoint on structures, actors, causal mechanisms, and events reflects a pluralistic conception of causality, acknowledging that multiple forms of causal relations can run simultaneously. This includes linear causality, in which events unfold through direct chains of cause and effect characteristic of relatively simple phenomena, as well as complex causality, which involves reciprocal interactions, feedback loops, or emergent effects. For example, explanations for the outbreak of *World War I* can extend beyond the immediate triggering event - the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand - to encompass intermediate structural conditions, such as the geopolitical alliances among European powers, military escalation, and the arms race between Germany and the United Kingdom. They may also account for broader, long-term factors, including Germany's industrial leap, the relative decline of the Russian and Ottoman Empires, the spread of nationalism and socialism, and several geopolitical tensions (Geels, 2022, p. 6). Unlike post-structuralism, these forms of causality are not multiple perspectives of equal value (and therefore relative); they are explanations of different domains of reality.

Post-structuralism's discursive reductionism leads to relativism in social research. Relativistic approaches stress that social facts, processes, or entities are always understood relative to other frameworks, such as conceptual schemes, theoretical propositions, or sets of meanings and representations. They assert that these social facts are wholly constituted by such discursive constructions. However, this form of discursive reductionism and radical relativism undermines the notion of causality in the social realm, effectively preventing any systematic examination into the consequences originating from the interaction of real causal forces (Iosifides, 2017, pp. 5-6).

Bhaskar opposes the traditional Hegelian grasping of dialectics as a linear, triadic process of negation (thesis - antithesis - synthesis). He challenges the view that dialectics merely entails the interpenetration of opposites within a given structure or system, culminating in their resolution or subsumption into a higher-order totality. Instead, Bhaskar asserts that dialectical processes and configurations do not necessarily result in eliminatory or superseding outcomes at a superordinate level (Creaven, 2002, p. 82). Bhaskar also notes that dialectical processes are not always characterized by opposition or antagonism. In the most general terms, he defines dialectics as any interaction between differentiated but related elements. Hegel privileged unity over difference; Bhaskar reverses this (Dialectical Critical Realism, 2014). Unlike Hegel's dialectics, which focuses on the resolution of contradictions, Bhaskar's dialectics embraces the plurality, complexity and contradictions of the world (Norrrie, 2024, pp. 386-387). This complexity and coexistence prepares the ground for developing a post-structuralist analysis method in which there is no pattern between the phenomena and each of the actors creates their own reality, independent of causality. In this case, critical concepts in international relations such as "occupation," "annexation," "liberation," "humanitarian intervention," etc. lose their meaning and become relativized. However, whether or not the thesis and anti-theses constitute a synthesis, the facts are contradictory and less contradictory compared to each other, and this is the basis of competition - an alternative to totalization in a superior synthesis. Cause-effect relationships should be sought in the competition of

these contradictions, and the unresolved nature of the contradictions should not prevent academic efforts to distinguish between contradictory phenomena.

Conclusion

The findings as a result of the study's review the position of post-structuralism as a methodological tool in international relations in light of Bhaskar's critical realism are as follows:

Post-structuralism lacks a scientific framework that allows for empirical testing. Although poststructuralism's emphasis is on understanding, not explanation, understanding itself inherently requires the existence of *a priori foundational knowledge*, in other words, a conceptualization, perspective, model, or hypothesis that enables cognitive processing of new data which is susceptible to falsification. The fact that knowledge can always be acquired through scientific frameworks does not mean that all of these frameworks are of equal value. Some scientific frameworks are superior to their rivals in explaining reality.

Post-structuralism does not have an accepted methodology regarding the concepts and methods that should be followed in an international relations research. Post-structuralism can only be used as a tool for criticism of the concepts that underpin mainstream theories of international relations (e.g. power, hegemony, threat, security, etc.) rather than as a methodological tool in itself. Post-structuralism borrows the concepts of rationalist international relations theories and criticizes them on the basis of philosophy of language; however, it has not developed a unique concept that would contribute to the thought of international relations. Post-structuralism does not have any testable or falsifiable assumptions regarding international relations.

International relations is a human activity, but it cannot be reduced to that activity. There are unique structures created by human activities that, once formed, transcend human subjective initiative, possessing new characteristics not present in the subsystems that gave rise to their causal existence, and possessing their own autonomy. Post-structuralism, on the other hand, ignores a structure that limits the calculations, behaviors and interactions of actors, rewards and punishes them depending on their decisions, and reduces the distinctive reality of international relations to human subjective views. However, as emphasized above, just as scientific frameworks that better grasp reality are more successful in the scientific arena, discourses that conform to reality are more successful in the international policy arena.

Actors, the units of analysis in the field of international relations, may behave "post-structuralistically", but the method of analyzing them cannot be post-structuralist. International relations is not a closed system. Therefore, assessing the impact of generative mechanisms in a complex international field where many factors interact simultaneously is extremely difficult. Since different mechanisms can cancel each other out, it must be accepted that generative mechanisms will not always generate observable events, and contrary to post-structuralism's denial of their existence, these mechanisms must be considered as tendencies. The existence of discourses that coincide with tendencies in the field of international relations continues to coexist with discourses that

contradict them. Although this complexity and intertwinement are used as a basis for post-structuralism's claim that there is no universal reality, it is a requirement of critical realist international relations science to highlight a research technique that prioritizes the units' receiving feedback from reality in the form of success or failure with reference to generative mechanisms.

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