

# Why Canada Did Not Go To War in Iraq: A Hegemonic Discourse Analysis

Jonas Holmlund

## Abstract

This essay discusses from a post-structuralist perspective why Canada did not participate in the United States-led war against Iraq in 2003 from a post-structuralist perspective. The essay argues that the question “why” must be understood through the discourse formed by the US which aimed for international governance and how this discourse related and worked together with a Canadian identity and genealogy. A Canadian identity in the form of a long tradition of both integrated relationship with the US and a commitment to multilateral co-operations like the United Nations. Furthermore, that the key factor to answer the question “why” lies in how the US failed to produce and uphold a hegemonic discourse that had enough power to limit Canada’s framework, wherein they could act.

We must stop the evil ones so our children and grandchildren can know peace and security and freedom in the greatest nation on the face of the Earth. (CNN, 2003)

The following remarks were made by the former President of the United States, George W. Bush, in a speech to the nation on 17th October, 2001. Today, nine years after this speech, it feels almost surreal to think that a president can talk about “[stopping] the evil ones” and “peace and security and freedom” in the same sentence. However, these words do not have the same meaning now as they had in 2001. The United States’ “war on terror”, with the invasion of both Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, has had an effect on our understanding of who “the evil ones” are and how they will be stopped. It is, nevertheless, not difficult to connect this speech and the war against terror without relating it to the 9/11 attacks.

Political Scientist Maja Zehfuss (2003: 515) argues that “we might in fact be better off forgetting September 11.” Zehfuss implies that our memory of 9/11 has been used to justify the war against terror. She states, “[m]aybe we remember September 11, but we forget that we have changed, that we are no longer who we were that day” (2003: 526).

To what degree did the memory of 9/11 play a role in Canada’s decision to go to war against Afghanistan 2001? An even more interesting question is why Canada chose not to join US in the invasion of Iraq in 2003. In the article *Why did Canada sit out the Iraq war?* (2006), Srdjan Vucetic argues that a Canadian identity was formed by its history; Vucetic proposes that this is why Canada did not participate in the Iraq war in 2003. Vucetic later states in his dissertation that “identity shapes state action by making some cooperative policies more likely than others” (2009). Another attempt to answer the question has been made by Bruno Charbonneau and Wayne Cox (2008), who argue that the question must be seen through the integrated nature of the relation between Canada and the US, especially the extensive history of military and defence co-operation. Furthermore, American hegemony and military practices were integrated so that it became an instrumental and persuasive power of its own. But the invasion of Iraq stepped outside of this integrated relation and practice. That is why Canada did not participate in the war. Other works like those of John Herd Thompson (2003) and Andrew Richter (2005), discuss the lack of co-operation in relation to the notion that Canada could not go against the ideal multilateralism which it had tried to attain since World War II. Finally, Rick Fawn (2008) argues that Canada’s decision lacked coherency and

sufficient grounding in Canadian foreign tradition. Furthermore, that the decision was belated and not constrained by either the public opinion or the pressure of the US.

This essay will, in contrast to previous attempts, discuss the question of why Canada did not participate in the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 from a post-structuralist perspective. However, the essay does not aim to give a conclusive answer to the question “why”. Instead, it will argue that our comprehension of the question “why” needs to be understood from how Canada interrelates to the discourse of the Global North as well as the discourse formed in the United States after 9/11. Furthermore, the question of “why” must be understood through the concepts of genealogy, identity and governmentality. First, the post-structural perspectives’ ontological base will be explained and the concept of discourse defined. This theoretical background will be followed by three parts; each will discuss Canada’s action and role in the international arena through the concepts of genealogy, identity and governmentality.

### **Post-structuralism**

Post-structuralism, also referred as post-modernism or deconstructivism, is a theory that has many different names and theorists have argued the merits of each (Devetak, 2005: 161). This essay will use post-structuralism as a synonym for all the different names and, therefore, not exclude varieties of the theory. It is, however, not that simple to refer to it as a theory either. David Campbell (2007: 206) writes that post-structuralism should be perceived as a critical approach rather than a theory in the classical sense. Regardless if it is referred to as a theory or not, Campbell argues that the critical approach is the common and key denominator. To fully understand the post-structural critique, it is necessary to explain its ontological and epistemological base. Classic theories in the area of International Relations, such as realism and liberalism, use positivist understandings of the world and what constitutes knowledge. Positivist understanding means that there is an external world that is possible to measure and assign value to. The critique to this viewpoint is post-positivist which understands that there is an external world, but that there is no objective truth. Instead, what is important is the subjective understanding of the object (Campbell, 2007: 208-09).

When something is subjective, language plays a central role because it is through language that the object can be described and understood. In post-structuralism the concept of discourse is used to explain this relation between language and the actual meaning of objects and how discourses socially construct and constitute our world.

Discourse is socially constituted as well as socially conditioned — it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. (Wodak, 1996: 15)

However, Linguistic professor Norman Fairclough (1992: 4) writes in his book *Discourse and Social Change* that the concept of discourse is used differently between academic disciplines. He suggests that the linguistic uses are narrow and that they can be used in positivist ways, but the concept of discourse is also used by social theorists in the form of a broader concept which focuses not only on a text as written word, but extends it to encapsulate all kinds of interactions. In this essay, discourse will be discussed as a broader concept.

Due to the fact that the following discussion mainly is based on Foucauldian theory, it is necessary to mention that Michel Foucault (1977) related discourse to power and knowledge. The way in which power controls discourse sets limits on what can be said and what cannot. Power is also connected to knowledge in that it both controls what constitutes knowledge and

that knowledge controls power. The relationship between power and knowledge will be discussed further under the concept of identity.

## **Genealogy**

According to Devetak (2005: 163), the concept of genealogy is best known from Friedrich Nietzsche's book *On the Genealogy of Morality* from 1887. However, Roland Bleiker's explanation of genealogy is best suited for the purpose of this essay. As such, genealogy "[focuses] on the process by which we have constructed origins and given meaning to particular representations of the past, representations continuously guide our daily lives and set clear limits to political and social options" (Bleiker, 2000:25).

In other words, this means is that discourses are formed of their pasts and act as frameworks in which we can act. Foucault uses the word domination and imposition, insisting that a dominating discourse does not have one single history; instead, it is composed of a variety of histories that have melted together (Devetak, 2005: 163). This argument is clearly distinct from the constructivist theory, which would argue that there is one history that can be examined and a causality line proven (Fierke, 2007).

The concept of genealogy can explain Canada's reaction to 9/11 and its participation of the US' invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Research on the effects of 9/11 from the perspective of genealogy can roughly be summarized to conclude that the discourse of 9/11 shaped a framework that made the war possible (Campbell, 2002: 18; Edkins, 2002: 245-6, Zehfuss, 2003). Cynthia Weber (2002) provides an example of the similarities to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor 1941. However, this research is focused on the US, but as Vucetic (2006) and Charbonneau and Cox (2008) agree, there is a considerable bond between Canada and the US when it comes to identity and integration on an institutional level.

The integrated relationship and the long history of co-operation should therefore have formed a discourse that led Canada into the war against Iraq in 2003. However, this did not happen and the conclusion is that Canada cannot be examined through the perspective of a single North American discourse. It is not possible to talk about a single hegemony discourse for the global north or the western world. Dirk Nabers (2006) writes, in his article *Culture and Collective Action*, that Germany also did not join the war against Iraq in 2003, even though they were a member of NATO and considered to be a country of the global north.

Nabers (2006: 230) argues that one of the reasons behind Germany's decision to not join the war lies in their history of multilateralism and their commitment to the rule of international law under the United Nations (UN). In other words, Germany's refusal to join forces can be attributed to the US' failure to get support in the UN, as well because the war did not fit into the framework of German discourse. A similar argument is also possible in Canada's case. According to the work of John Herd Thompson (2003) and Andrew Richter (2005) there is a Canadian tradition of multilateralism and support for decisions made by the UN. Canada has, for example, on several occasions supported UN peacekeeping missions with troops (Charbonneau and Cox, 2008: 315).

Canada has exhibited both a strong history of co-operation with the US and with commitments to multilateralism. Here a simple conclusion can be drawn: that these two discourses stand against each other and that the reason Canada did not join the war against Iraq in 2003 is because the multilateralism discourse was the hegemonic discourse. However, this conclusion is vague and it fails to answer why the hegemony discourse changed. Therefore, this essay will continue to discuss the question of "why" using the concepts of identity and between power and knowledge relationships.

## Identity

Before discussing the concept of Identity, it is once again necessary to mention Foucault's concept of power-knowledge. Basically, this contention involves the relationship between how power forms knowledge and how knowledge constitutes power. This concept is crucial for the understanding of how discourse can obtain a position of hegemony and also constitute hegemony.

Vucetic (2006) has made the most extensive attempt to empirically isolate a Canadian identity which could explain why they did not join the war. Vucetic's research is based primarily on popular texts. In his later dissertation from 2009, he argues that domestic identity shapes the foreign policy and limits what the state can do, or cannot do, when it comes to cooperation with other states. However, Vucetic's research does not explain how discourses change.

Nabers (2006) discusses in the Germany example, that the attack on 9/11 was an attack on the western ideals of freedom and democracy upon which western identities rely upon. The subsequent war on terror can therefore be understood as a response to that threat. As Nabers' argues, Germany did not feel threatened by Iraq and there was no discourse that could support the war. Identity in this case can be understood as a definition between "us and them" and how "they", in discourse, can turn into something threatening and dangerous (Devetek, 2005). It is possible to argue that Canadian identity, similar to German, did feel threatened by the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. However, in the case of Iraq there was no longer a clear threat. In terms of power-knowledge it can be understood that the knowledge of the Iraq situation limited the power of the discourse formed by the US. Thus, power-knowledge works both ways. It can be argued that the US failed to promote a hegemonic discourse. The central aspects of this argument will be continued below and through a discussion of the concept of governmentality.

## Governmentality

Governmentality is another concept of Foucault. It was introduced in his book series *The History of Sexuality* (1976-84). Foucault criticizes the idea that the state was in essence of its own and that it controlled its citizens. Instead, he argued that power and knowledge could produce discourses that led to a form of social control; that the citizens actually govern themselves. Foucault also uses the concept of bio-power: techniques or knowledge that controls groups of people; these techniques can take different shapes and have changed throughout the history. Some examples of forms in the contemporary world are the state, various institutions, the free market, or various disciplines of science (Jaeger, 2008: 591-4; Bennett, 2003: 53-6; Foucault, 1982).

Governmentality is often referred to how citizens within the state become controlled or how they control themselves. However, Hans Martin Jaeger (2008) uses the concept in his article '*World Opinion*' and the *Founding of the UN* to explain how discourse can form international politics, more specifically how world opinion has been used in the formation of UN.

In the context of the emerging United Nations, 'world opinion' operated as a discursive frame for governing international security, welfare, trusteeship, human rights, and education. In all of these, 'world opinion' took on distinctly 'governmental' qualities in Foucault's sense of the term. (Jaeger, 2008: 608)

Jaegers final conclusion is that the discourse of world opinion might not stop armed conflicts. Nevertheless, world opinion can still be used as a discourse “as a medium, which [...] might contribute to shaping contemporary international governance” (2008: 610).

Zehfuss (2003: 524) makes a similar argument in discussing the way in which the US has used 9/11, or the memory of it, as a means to justify and get support for an international war and also to enact domestic laws concerning surveillance and security. These laws and restrictions of personal freedom would have been unthinkable in a pre-9/11 world. Zehfuss also demonstrates, with examples from Germany, how the same discourse was used by the German government to enact anti terror laws (2003: 516-7).

The US may have been able to shape a form of international governance in the early stage of the war against terror. But as shown by both Nabers (2005) and Zehfuss (2003) with the case of Germany and with the Canadian case, the US did not manage to uphold a hegemonic discourse.

## **Conclusion**

This essay has, from a post-structuralist perspective, discussed the question of why Canada chose not to join the US war against Iraq in 2003. By discussing and examining it through the concepts of genealogy, identity and governance, this essay argued that the question of “why” cannot be understood through a single answer. Instead, it must be understood through a discourse formed by the US that aimed for international governance and how this discourse related and worked together with a Canadian identity and genealogy.

Throughout history, Canada has had both an integrated relationship with the US and a commitment to multilateral co-operations like the UN. It can therefore support theories that argue that the answer to why Canada chose not to join the war can be found in its identity or in its genealogy. However, the problem is in explaining how and why the discourse changed during the period between the Afghanistan war in 2001 and the Iraq war in 2003. The question of why cannot be answered only by examining Canada per se.

The key is to understanding the question through the concept of governmentality and how the US failed to uphold a hegemonic discourse that produced and reproduced a form of international governance. As proposed through the works of Jaeger, Nabers and Zehfuss, the discourse used by the US did not have enough power to limit Canada’s framework, wherein they could act. The threat to Canada’s identity as a free and democratic society was a result of the 9/11 attack and could not be reproduced to justify the war against Iraq in 2003.

In a continuance of this essay, it would be interesting to do a full scale genealogical discourse analysis, because it would further aid our understanding of the Canadian discourse and how it struggled against the discourse constructed by the US after 9/11.

## References

- Bennett, Tony. 2003. "Culture and Governmentality." In *Foucault, Cultural Studies and Governmentality*, ed. Jack Z. Bratich, Jeremy Packer and Cameron McCarthy. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Bleiker, Roland. 2000. *Popular Dissent, Human Agency, and Global Politics*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Campbell, David. 2002. "Time is Broken: The Return of the Past in the Response to September 11." *Theory and Event*, 5(4): 1-24.
- Campbell, David. 2007. "Poststructuralism." In *International Relations Theories*, ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Charbonneau, Bruno and Cox, Wayne S. 2008. "Global Order, US Hegemony and Military Integration: The Canadian-American Defense Relationship." *International Political Sociology*, 2(4): 305-21.
- CNN. 2003. *Transcript: President Bush speech on terrorism, October 17, 2001*. <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0110/17/se.17.html> (March 18, 2010)
- Devetak, Richard. 2005. "Postmodernism." In *Theories of International Relations*, ed. Scott Burchill. New York: Palgrave.
- Edkins, Jenny. 2002. "Forget Trauma? Responses to September 11." *International Relations*, 16(2): 243-56.
- Fairclough, Norman. 1992. *Discourse and Social Change*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Fawn, Rick. 2008. "No Consensus with the Commonwealth, No Consensus with Itself? Canada and the Iraq War." *The Round Table*, 97(397): 519-33.
- Fierke, Karin M. 2007. "Constructivism." In *International Relations Theories*, ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Foucault, Michel. 1982. "The Subject and Power." *Critical Inquiry*, 8(4): 777-95.
- Jaeger, Hans-Martin. 2008. "'World Opinion' and the Founding of the UN: Governmentalizing International Politics." *European Journal of International Relations*, 14(4): 589-618.
- Nabers, Dirk. 2006. "Culture and Collective Action: Japan, Germany and the United States after 11 September 2001." *Cooperation and Conflict*, 41(3): 305-26.

Richter, Andrew. 2005. "From Trusted Ally to Suspicious Neighbor: Canada-U.S. Relations in a Changing Global Environment." *The American Review of Canadian Studies*, 35(3): 471-502.

Thompson, John H. 2003. "Playing by the New Washington Rules: The U.S.-Canada Relationship, 1994-2003." *The American Review of Canadian Studies*, 33(1): 5-26.

Vucetic, Srdjan. 2006. "Why Did Canada Sit Out of the Iraq War? One Constructivist Analysis." *Canadian Foreign Policy/La Politique étrangère du Canada*, 13(1): 133-53.

Vucetic, Srdjan. 2009. "The Anglosphere: A genealogy of an identity in international relations." Doctoral dissertation. The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

Weber, Cynthia. 2002. "Flying Planes Can be Dangerous", *Millenium*, 31(1): 129-47.

Wodak, Ruth. 1996. *Disorders of Discourse*, London: Longman.

Zehfuss, Maja. 2003. "Forget September 11." *Third World Quarterly*, 24(3): 513-28.