

A Post Structuralist Inquiry into Pandemic and Politics: Why Method Matters?

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

Received: September 05, 2020

Accepted: November 22, 2020

Volume: 2

Issue: 2

KEYWORDS

Pandemic politics, Post
Structuralism, Philosophical
Method, COVID-19, Research
Method, Biopolitics,
Governmentality

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic as a phenomenon has emerged as an area of interest for researchers. Social scientists of all discipline are now trying to provide understanding of this phenomenon from their own perspective. As a result, scientists are relying on different methods to understand this pandemic. Again, events such as coercive lockdown, USA's withdrawal from WHO, authoritarian turn of democratic governmentality are also allowing skeptics to call for a 'rethink' of the Phenomenon, where many philosophical methods become relevant such as structuralism, dialectics and post structuralism etc. This paper will attempt to provide a post structuralist inquiry into Pandemic and politics that is currently going on. In order to do so, this paper will shade light on 'why method (Philosophical) matters?' and provide an 'alternative' perspective of Pandemic and politics that challenges our existing interpretations.

1. Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic came as a huge blow that affected almost every aspect of life at present. As the whole world is currently experiencing this pandemic, in every aspect of our society and state, changes are visible. This time is the time of 'New Normal' and concept like 'social distancing', 'Lockdown', "social isolation" are the buzz word. These new phenomena have also become the area of interests for the researchers who wants to know or inquire about the pandemic as related aspect such as politics. Various researchers can come up with various types of understanding of these phenomena where philosophical methods of their research surely play vital role. Again, in the most researches that are being conducted, the new social constructions and the pandemic related politics are being highly criticized. The role of capitalism, government and the people are also attracting audiences to understand the pandemic. Again, the coercive nature of democratic government ensuring lockdown all around the world, the inconsistency of western pedagogy of leadership etc are also pushing researchers to 'rethink'. In this context, Post Structuralism as a philosophical method in social research becomes relevant as it helps researchers to address these 'rethinking'. This paper will present an alternative perspective of pandemic and politics by implying post structuralism as research method. In pursuit of doing so, this paper will rationalize why philosophical method matters in social research; this paper will address that, philosophical method matters because they provide the approach or viewpoint of a certain problem or phenomena. Then the paper will present the 'post structuralist' inquiry into pandemic and politics amidst the current COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Methodology

This is a qualitative research based on secondary data derived from books, Journal articles, newspapers, and blogs.

3. Method and Philosophy: Why do they matter?

According to Merriam-Webster, method means "a procedure or process for attaining an object". (Merriam-Webster) The same dictionary also refers method as "a discipline that deals with the principles and techniques of scientific inquiry". (Merriam-Webster) This implies method has two aspects- techniques and principle. Both technique and principle have roots in philosophy. Therefore, philosophy behind the method or philosophical method helps researchers to conduct inquiries from distinct philosophical standpoint.

The word method has its root in Latin. It is consisted of two parts, *Meta* and *Hodos*. *Meta* means “in pursuit or quest of” and latter means “a way or road”. (Etymonline) Therefore, Method is the standard that helps a researcher to conduct his research or scientific inquiry into things. Method provides perspective and standard approach that is invested in philosophy and logical standpoint.

Different methods provide different scope to look at in a social research. Therefore, throughout the history of social research, many philosophical methods emerged that helps researchers by providing different philosophical understanding such as Dialectics, Structuralism, Post structuralism, positivism, behavioralism, discourse analysis etc.

Each method explains an event from their own point of view depending on their philosophy. For instant, the COVID-19 pandemic and politics related to it can be explained depending upon any method and each method can provide different understanding. Some method can also provide relatively same understanding also. For instant, while discourse analysis will depend upon the text or oral languages to understand the pandemic politics, dialectics will stick to argument that reveals contradictions. Again, while Structuralism and post structuralism will provide normative lens to understand the pandemic and politics, Positivism will stick to ‘objective truth’ or ‘Value free’.

To understand why method matters, I would like to propose a metaphor, where method is both the available routes and vehicles, researcher is the traveler and the travel destination is the research. Thus, method plays a vital role in conducting research. This paper will explain the pandemic and politics in the next sections using the post structuralist method that will help to bring an ‘alternative’ understanding of the Pandemic.

4. Post Structuralism

Post structuralism is a European school of philosophy and method of social analysis. It has a close affinity with post modernism and sometimes is used ‘interchangeably’. (Wright, 2003) Post Structuralism was developed by J. Derrida, Mitchell Foucault and Françoise Lyotard in 1970s. According to Usher and Edwards, Post Structuralism works by “problematizing [existing] system of thoughts and organizations.”(Usher and Edwards, 1994) Post structuralists also challenges existing notions and ideas and doesn’t take them as ‘fixed’. Rather, Post Structuralism is concerned with the ‘popular’ power and their role in introducing such ‘fixed’ notions in the society. It also has root in structuralism in general in the sense that, Post Structuralism also challenges existing structure and power relations and doesn’t take them as ‘given’.

Post Structuralism heavily depends on ‘deconstructive’ method, which was developed by Derrida. This became very famous as according to Agger, Post structuralism offers “a serious challenge to traditional literary and cultural criticism dominated by ‘textual’ objectivism.” (Agger, 1991) Deconstruction helps social scientists to overcome and challenge the existing notions of reading and writing. For Derrida, texts are written in such a way that it has the ability to hide the conflict or ‘mask’ the ground realities. For instant, if someone presents cash crops such as ‘Tea’ as a empowering sector for both men and women in remote rural north of Bengal, Post structuralists may beg to differ that, there are severe underpayment exist and the sector is relying on such underpayments. Post Structuralism also quite often has a ‘normative’ outlook and therefore has opposite stance of ‘Positivism’ and its idea of ‘value free’.

Post Structuralists try to understand the literary work of all medium - Written and oral and try transcend beyond the existing ‘deluded’ presumptions. In pursuit of doing so, Post structuralists introduce the idea of ‘Textuality’. Textuality itself has many different meaning to different Post structuralists. According to Rene Raud, Textuality can be understood as sets of various texts ordered and related to each other that have pre-arranged interpretations. (Raud, 2016) Such interpretations are dominated and injected in the society to serve someone depending on culture, power and dominance. So, Post structuralists pursue the goal of understanding these phenomena. And in order to do so, they depend on ‘deconstruction’ to challenge the ‘presumptions’ and try to go beyond the presumptuous interpretation. Because of such trait, Post structuralism is a very common and famous tool for challenge and critique the existing system or ideas specially the dominant ones such as western literary works.

When the COVID-19 broke out, it marked a new era of world politics after the event of 9/11. Many existing ideas and interpretations are now seemed to be somewhat ‘false’ or ‘non-reliable’ at present. Discourses such as Globalization is currently facing huge crisis and the western ‘pedagogy’ on various presumptions are now being heavily challenged both in the western and non western realm of thinking. In such a time, to critique the existing presumptions and clouds of unchallenged interpretations, Post structuralism can play vital role, thanks to its reliance on ‘deconstruction’. The next part of this paper will try to display the post structuralist method and its relevance in COVID-19 related socio-political research at present by implying it and challenging many various existing ideas.

5. Pandemic and Politics: 'Corona Effect'

When the COVID-19 pandemic came in the first quarter of 2020, Societies around the world experience something that was new to most generations. Concepts like lockdown were imposed. People were 'taught' to maintain social distancing. Our normal life was suddenly changed and securitized. A rat race in pursuit of vaccine started, billions of dollars are still being invested. While states decided to pursue pandemic management policies, long term lockdowns were lifted in almost every country with partial lockdowns and gradually lifting lockdowns. Many governments pursued the policy of 'herd immunity' officially or unofficially which was also relatively new to the commoners. In the phase of 'partial lockdown' or lifting of lockdown, states eased its burden of responsibility by sharing it with the mass people where people were free to do conduct their economic affairs but they were 'on their own'. Again, even after seven months of pandemic, in most of the third world countries, anti-body test hasn't been made for everyone. As a result, commoners are still unsure whether they developed antibody or they need vaccine. Many skeptics argue that, this is due to increase the sale of vaccine when it comes to the market. In such situations, Foucault's concept of 'biopower' or 'biopolitics' becomes very relevant as containing contagious diseases are one form of 'containing damaging forms'.

Then again, we have seen lockdowns and anti-lockdown protests, in many parts of world, civil movements on various issues also started such as anti-lockdown protests and issues such as Black lives matter or anti rape protests. Anti lockdown protesters also identified 'lockdown' as an 'imposed' governmental policy. The authoritarian nature of democratic states can also be seen in many cases during this pandemic. For instant, the suppression of death rate in many countries and coercive measures to maintain lockdowns.

In the international arena, this pandemic also has its own effect. For instant, the challenge to globalization has been reinforced as the virus has used the concept to become 'globalised'. The relations between power and wealth became more consolidated as the inequality is ever rising. The western notions of international relations are also not being too reliable at this moment. The current debate on US election and mail vote also shows the dilemmas of democracy at the heart of so called 'most-democratic' state. Again, USA's withdrawal from World Health organization (WHO) amidst the pandemic and reluctance to address environmental issues with the world also attacks our common idea about the western leadership ability which is, that in the crisis moment, it will be the west or 'hegemony' or superpower who will take the leadership. But USA's isolationist policy begs to differ. Again, in most of the states, policies are formulated that are mostly market oriented, for example the bailout packages or the motivational packages offered by the states. Traditional interpretations of such policies create consciousness that, these are to save the 'economy' and 'livelihood' but aren't these also creating risk toward the commoners as due to lockdown being lifted; they are forced to go out for their livelihood? Again, many states are pursuing herd immunity at present which raises questions among the skeptics whether the citizens are equal in the eye of states or not!

Politics and pandemic is constantly shaping each other and while this is going on, interpretations are being generated that has tendency to manipulate and construct the view of commoners. At the same time, western ideas and their role in crisis moments are also being challenged everyday which can be understood easily through implying post structuralist method. Post structuralist method in COVID-19 related social research can help to deconstruct such existing notions and provide a critical perspective. In the next section, this paper will attempt to imply post structuralist method and will also try to provide an 'alternative' perspective of 'Pandemic and politics'.

6. Post structuralist inquiry into Pandemic and politics

Post Structuralist perspective can help us to understand both newly introduced concepts such as 'social distancing', 'new normal' etc and can also provide us with alternative perspective about the pandemic.

When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, lockdown was the common policy for states all over the world. There were divisions among the people who supported for and protested against the lockdown. As a result, throughout the world coercive measures has been taken by governments who are mostly 'democratic'. Such coercive policies also violated basic tenants of liberty all over the world. As a result, Lockdown as a policy emerged as the 'crude expression' of state power. (Jones, 2020) Jones's study also showed that, in Foucauldian perspective, people obey not because of reason or fear but because they are subjectified first, and then this subjectified elements are turned into objectified by analysis of science. (Jones, 2020) This can also be implied to understand lockdown. Again, the use of enforcement to ensure lockdown by the government also shows that, there is a link between the governmentality and biopolitics, where governments are motivated and engaged in biopolitics using sovereign tools such as military, police and coercive measures. Hannah, Dutta and

Schemann's study also supports such claims from their experience of German and European lockdown where they identified the boipower of the state to 'making live' rather than 'letting live'. (Hannah, Hutta and Schemann, 2020)

Again, such coercive policies of 'democratic' states or governments also make skeptics alert. Dean's idea of 'authoritarian turn of governmentality' can be relevant in this situation. (Dean, 1999) While in the general interpretations, such coercive policies can be seen as 'disciplinary' measures by the states, but in case of lockdown, 'disciplinary' measures do not sustain effectiveness of lockdown rather coerces to make the lockdown effective which is why states ended up deploying punishments and surveillance measures. As a result, in poststructuralist understanding, such behaviors of states are not 'disciplinary' natures in governmentality but 'authoritarian turn' in governmentality.

On the other hand, post structuralism also offers an alternative perspective of the economic policies of the governments during pandemic. Our constructed idea of big 'companies' has been challenged immensely. Throughout the world, big companies failed to sustain themselves even not for six months. Government initiatives had to come up with their 'bailouts' and 'motivational packages' that would help them to sustain through the pandemic. Such 'much needed' intervention from government to regulate the market also challenges the idea of liberal market system which preached for 'least' or 'no' intervention of government. But pandemic scenario has been successful to prove that, market itself can't regulate itself. And again, the degree of 'free market' economy is very much 'embedded' in the sense that, in the crisis moment, state is the sole authority to which it seeks help for. This argument is not new in the sense that, after 2008 crisis and 'bailout' packages by US government, many practitioners of economics and politics raised such arguments. The recent development also supports their claim as in the pandemic scenario, market failed to sustain itself without the help of governments all over the world.

Again, in the same context, in the case of pandemic economy, post structuralism challenges the idea of 'corporate welfare' and raises questions whether such bailouts and motivational packages as government policy is an attempt to save capitalism or not? As such policies not only prove to save the 'wealthy people' but also are widening the global inequality. For instant, according to the guardian report, the billionaire wealth actually increased to 10.2trillion USD amidst the pandemic economy, which is a 27.5% increase within eight to nine months. (Neate, 2020) Such facts and evidences also allow post structuralists to rethink the available interpretation of 'pandemic economy' which is said to be vicious for all but the experiences begs to differ.

Post structuralist understanding of this pandemic also challenges the existing understanding about technological advancement and western pedagogy on their leadership ability. Though 21st century technology is very advanced, but it is not equal in the all fields and many fields are actually neglected or least funded such as the public health sector. Even big states do not have satisfactory public health sector and R&D. Again, while states are announcing their success in overcome of problems digitally and boasting about being 'digital state', 'Digital Divide' is clearer than ever during this pandemic as because of one's economic-geographic and educational position. Especially in the third world countries, where this divide is ever widening and effecting people in their economic activities and education. Western pedagogy on leadership ability is also challenged as in the pandemic scenario; it is the west who is still suffering more than anyone. Again, no collective movement or alliance or working body to manage the pandemic around the globe is established till today that also challenges the western 'popular' interpretations of leadership in current world. USA's withdrawal from World Health Organization (WHO) also shows isolationist policy and the nature of 'abandoning' in crisis moment which will be remembered surely in the future decision making.

Again, pandemic scenario also challenges the 'collectiveness' of the world of existing interpretations. Till today, states are relying on 'local' management of pandemic not on 'global' management. As a result, we can see segregated-isolationist policies in various parts of the world. As the pandemic scenario going on, the scope for global management is also shrinking. At first, the global and regional management was proposed in various parts of the world such as mobilizing SAARC in South Asia but due to states unwilling to co-operate or isolationist policies, initiatives failed miserably. Another important factor behind such observation is the severely challenged idea of 'globalization'. As mentioned before, COVID-19 pandemic scenario allows skeptics to challenges the idea of globalization and an 'anti-globalization' is very visible at present.

Thus, Post structuralism as a philosophical method in social research inquiries into the current pandemic and with the help of Foucauldian perspectives and concepts such as text, sub text, bio power, biopolitics, governmentality provides an alternative understanding of current pandemic that is going on.

7. Conclusion

Philosophical method helps researchers in their inquiry or research by providing 'standard' approaches. As there are differences in approaches that also may lead researchers to bring up 'different' perspectives as result, having a 'relevant' philosophical method in social research is very important. Though all methods have their own way of explaining pandemic and politics, this paper finds 'Post structuralism' more relevant and suitable in providing 'alternative' understanding of current pandemic that is going on.

The post structuralist understanding of current pandemic shades light on the government or state activity and challenges the general interpretations of them that ends up providing a critical understanding of pandemic politics. Again, post structuralism also challenges existing interpretations of western pedagogy. And with ground evidences and ongoing events, it also critiques the weakness of it. Post structuralist method also challenges the concept of 'Globalization'. And as it allows a researcher to challenge the traditional understanding of pandemic and related politics, Post structuralism is a relevant philosophical method to understand the pandemic from an alternative perspective.

Funding

This is an independent research where the author received no funding.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Sabrina Monjur, MSS in IPE (Ongoing), Department of IR, University of Dhaka for her kind support and help in this article.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest. There was no influence from any party.

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