Critical discourse analysis in Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism

El análisis crítico del discurso en el post-marxismo de Laclau y Mouffe

Análise crítica do discurso no pós-Marxismo de Laclau e Mouffe

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Abstract

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe exaggerate the textual aspects of social practice in their post-Marxist reflections. They developed an account of social practices and social cohesion in terms inspired by linguistics and discourse theory. Their work saw a growing rejection of economism and class reductionism and growing emphasis on the contested, contingent discursive construction of society. Contingency is the precondition of hegemony – the ground in which struggles for hegemony and the construction of populism occur. In this regard, they replace the Marxist notion of the causal primacy of the economy with a "primacy of the political". This leads to a discursive anti-foundationalism in which it is impossible to construct a unified society because all meanings and identities are contested, and its institutional foundations are potentially re-activated. The article concludes by comparing this exorbitation of language with a more limited cultural political economy approach that offers a "third way" between structuralism and idealism. It explores the conditions that shape the variation, selection and retention of sense- and meaning-making as well structuration. This approach seeks to explain why some discursive articulations get selected and become sedimented to be contested later and why some properties of institutions have enduring effects at different scales of action.

Keywords: Ernesto Laclau; Critical Discourse Analysis; The Exorbitation of Language; Hegemony; Cultural Political Economy.

Introduction

Norman Fairclough, the British critical discourse analyst, emphasizes the centrality of language to social order. This said, he cannot be charged with the exorbitation of discourse beyond the discursive field because he stresses that "whereas all linguistic phenomena are social, not all social phenomena are linguistic – though even those that are not just linguistic (economic production, for instance) typically have a substantial, and often underestimated, language element" (FAIRCLOUGH, 1989, p. 23). I also endorse Fairclough's move from synthesizing text-analytical techniques to engage with social theories on contemporary economic, political, and social change (e.g., CHOULIARAKI; FAIRCLOUGH, 1999). Two good examples of such engagement are *New Labour, New Language* (FAIRCLOUGH, 2000) on Third Way discourse and his critical dissection of discourses of globalization (FAIRCLOUGH, 2006). Thus, his discourse-theoretical approach straddles the divide between grand theory and grounded analytics because its disciples regularly link their analyses to changing social relations.

This essay examines the work of Ernesto Laclau and his collaboration with Chantal Mouffe and suggests that they exaggerate the textual aspects of social practice. This exorbitation of language can be illustrated from the following text:

> By "the discursive" I understand nothing which in a narrow sense relates to texts but the ensemble of phenomena of the societal production of meaning on which a society as such is based. It is not a question of regarding the discursive as a plane or dimension of the social but as having the same meaning as the social… the non-discursive is not opposite to the discursive as if one were dealing with two different planes because there is nothing societal that is determined outside the discursive. History and society are therefore an unfinished text (LACLAU, 1980a, p. 87).

This "unfinished text" is produced through contingent "articulatory practices". The notion of articulation implies that discursivity (in other words, the social) is always constituted relationally, always under construction, and liable to disarticulation. Articulation is also the basis of hegemony and the construction of populism. The "raw materials" of this social construction exist as unfixed polysemic discursive *elements* before they are articulated as specific *moments* within particular discourses. The struggle for hegemony is re-interpreted in terms of intervention to articulate different discursive elements into more or less discrete ideological ensembles that serve the interests of a fundamental social force. Elements can be

articulated to form different discourses (*sic*) because they have common nuclei of meaning that lack a fully determinate denotation and can be connotatively linked to other elements to produce the specific meanings they reveal in different discursive ensembles. The social is thereby located uneasily between attempts at fixing meaning and the ultimate infeasibility of these attempts. To the extent that these attempts succeed, it is because certain nodal points (*points de capiton*) emerge within discourse as privileged signifiers, or key principles, that limit the "play of meaning". It is around these nodal points that discursive forms crystallize. However, because these nodal points are internal to discourse, not grounded outside it, they are inherently unstable. Because they are sedimented, i.e., their discursive origins are forgotten, they can be challenged and re-politicized. Key principles always have what Derrida (1988) calls a "constitutive outside", that is, they exclude some elements in order to establish and stabilize a boundary but, in doing so, reveal the contingency of a hegemonic or dominant discourse.

It follows that meaning is only ever partially fixed and, given an ever-present surplus of possible meanings, any fix is contingent. It could have been fixed differently. Discourse therefore continually overflows the limits of any possible stabilization by nodal points (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1985, p. 113). Paradoxically, this lack of fixity is the precondition of hegemony. Contingency is the ground, or space, in which struggles for hegemony occur. Thus, the greater is the contingency, the greater is the scope for hegemonic contestation. It is an important part of Laclau's argument that the post-war world is becoming more contingent due to increasing globalization, democratic demands, the expansion of conflict and antagonism, and so on.

At stake here is the relation between signifiers and signified, which, partly following de Saussure's general course on linguistics, Laclau and Mouffe present as occurring entirely within discourse. It has no outside, extra-discursive referent. Indeed, having claimed that all social practices are discursive practices, they then ignore their extra-discoursal aspects. They conclude that an adequate social explanation must refer to signifying relations rather to any type of physical or material causality[1]. In emphasizing the purely contingent discursive articulation of the social world, they deny lawful links among events and qualities in the

[1] Laclau and Mouffe totally reject the base-superstructure distinction. They take this allusive and elusive metaphor literally and conclude that it posits total determination of the superstructure by an economic base that is a wholly self-sufficient as its own cause (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1985, pp. 120-1, 142; LACLAU, 1990, pp. 6-14, 55; LACLAU, 2005, p. 250). They ignore alternative meanings and never consider whether it could be re-inscribed into post-Marxist analysis.

social world (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1985). In short, they embrace what Mario Bunge called an "anti-determinist acausalism" (BUNGE, 1961, p. 29). Such claims ignore the need, long ago noted by Max Weber (1949), for explanations that are adequate at the level of causality as well as meaning[2]. In contrast, Laclau and Mouffe have a contingent explanation of causality: things could occur otherwise depending on articulation (cf. LACLAU, 2006).

The early discourse-theoretical writings

In complementary articles in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Mouffe and Laclau attacked economism in the analysis of politics and ideology. This critique was stated most clearly by Chantal Mouffe in this period in her review of the concept of hegemony in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (MOUFFE, 1979). She outlined three phases in the movement from economism to anti-economism in Marxist political and ideological analysis. Phase one was the pure and classic form of economism comprising a base-superstructure model coupled with the claim that all economic, political, and ideological subjects were at bottom class subjects (e.g., the Second International). The second phase endowed the political and ideological levels with their own effectivity but remained economist in tracing the origins of political and ideological practices to wilful class subjects whose actions are determined by the evolution of a class consciousness appropriate to their economic position (e.g., Korsch, Lukács). And the third phase broke with this class reductionist view by treating ideological practice as a sui generis process that constitutes subjects who are neither economically pre-defined nor, once constituted in and through ideologies, having a necessary class belonging (e.g., Gramsci, Togliatti) (see MOUFFE, 1979, pp. 169-178; cf. LACLAU, 1977, pp. 141-142, 158-159, 163-164; LACLAU, 1980, pp. 252-255; LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1981, *passim*).

While Mouffe and Laclau had together prepared the ground for a definite break with economism and class reductionism in the analysis of hegemony, significant residual elements of class reductionism remained in their initial studies (for details, see JESSOP, 1982, pp. 191-202). In subsequent studies, Laclau and Mouffe attempted to overcome these problems and developed a general theory of the discursive constitution of hegemony. They argue that all

[2] While Luhmann is also suspicious of causal explanation, his operative constructionism allows a regulative role for the real world beyond communication (LUHMANN, 1995). Laclau concedes this in his analysis of populism, in which external reality expresses itself via negation, i.e., by providing a 'reality check' that limits the resonance of alternative political projects, making some more plausible and appealing than others (LACLAU, 2005, pp. 89, 91-96, 190-1, 201).

social relations derive their social character from their discursive constitution: that is, all social practice constitutes itself in so far as it produces meaning (LACLAU 1980a, p. 87). This approach has important theoretical implications for the relations between “levels” and for the analysis of social subjectivity.

First, as the discursive is coextensive with the field of the social and, as such, all social relations are regarded as constituted in and through discourse, Laclau and Mouffe reject orthodox Marxist views of “base-superstructure” relations in which the so-called material base is seen as extra-discursive and the superstructure alone is discursive. Thus, even if one wished to retain the metaphor of “base” and “superstructure" or the topographical image of “regions” of a social formation, then the unity of a social formation, to the extent that it exists, depends on the contingent articulation among these discursive practices. It does not derive from a necessary correspondence between base and superstructure. In this sense, Laclau and Mouffe re-interpret Gramsci’s notion of “historical bloc” in discourse-theoretical terms. For the Italian, the historical bloc shows how “material forces are the content and ideologies are the form, though this distinction between form and content has purely didactic value” (1971, p. 377). For the Argentinian and Belgian, the historical bloc is a purely ideological construction (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1985, pp. 170, 176).

Second, their approach in this early period implies that the subjects through whom social relations are mediated and reproduced are also constituted in and through discourse. One can no longer privilege class subjects over popular-democratic forces nor treat class struggle as necessarily more influential than popular-democratic struggles. Class antagonism is not inscribed in the social relations of production considered as an extra-discursive structure but derives from the particular discursive identification of class subjects. This suggests that class struggle is first of all a struggle about the constitution of class subjects before it is a struggle between class subjects. It follows from this that the field of political intervention is extremely broad. This must have crucial implications for hegemony considered as "political, intellectual, and moral leadership” (GRAMSCI, 1971, p. 57) as well as for the struggle for such leadership.

Although these inter-discursive practices cannot be modelled outside specific conjunctures, Laclau and Mouffe do identify two basic modes of hegemonic articulation. In a discourse of *difference*, hegemony neutralises ideologically constituted antagonisms by re-interpreting them as differences within a national-popular collective will. For example, class

antagonisms inscribed within the relations of production are transformed into positive-sum differences among economic agents performing complementary functions in the division of labour. This involves the localisation of differences that must be negotiated and compromised within a broad consensual framework established through the dominant discourse concerning the parameters of the "national-popular" collective will. Examples of such a discourse of difference include the "transformist" politics of Giovanni Giolitti's prime ministerial role in Italy from 1892 to 1921 and the "One Nation" discourse of the nineteenth-century British Conservative politician, Benjamin Disraeli (cf. LACLAU, 1977, p. 115; LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1985, p. 130).

The second form of hegemonic discourse involves constituting a system of equivalences among different positions and subjects. This can occur either through (1) a common polarity that is juxtaposed in an irreducible dualism to another pole and defined as superior to it or (2) a common antagonism to an internal and/or external enemy that must be defeated to advance each particular position or subject. Examples of such a *discourse of equivalence* would include the irreducibly dualist discourses of *apartheid* and the ruptural populist discourses of Chartism in England, Jacobinism in France, Fascism in Italy, and Maoism in China (cf. LACLAU, 2005, 2006). This friend-enemy distinction became crucial to Laclau and Mouffe's analysis of populism.

In this period, both modes of discourse were seen to contain dangers to the dominant class. A discourse of difference transforms negatively-charged contradictions into positively differentiated contrarieties and creates the ideological conditions needed to integrate different subjectivities into a system of democratic politics. But the dominant class can go too far in absorbing and legitimating the demands of those in subordinate positions so that the latter forces can impose their own discourse within the state apparatus during crises in ways that undermine that class's neutralising capacities. This can be seen in the appropriation of democratic discourse into a socialist discourse as monopoly capital finds it increasingly hard to maintain liberal democratic traditions and institutions. Likewise, the dominant class can assimilate the "people" in a discourse of equivalence to its own hegemonic project, which is particularly common during periods of crisis. Nonetheless, in doing so, it runs the risk that populist forces will develop the anti-status quo, anti-capitalist elements in populist discourse to the point of a radical break with the interests of the dominant class. This can be seen in the threats posed to capital as the Nazi left drew on socialist traditions and the Italian fascist left

drew on the Mazzinian, Garibaldian, and syndicalist traditions. Moreover, whereas the discourse of difference tends to be integrative in so far as it disarticulates the organisation of the various subordinate positionalities into a single "people" interpellated as the dynamic pole of confrontation with the power bloc, the discourse of equivalence is more readily "turned" to radical, ruptural goals by articulating the "people" to a revolutionary project rather than to a populism of the right (LACLAU, 1977, pp. 121-122, 162-163; 1980a, pp. 90-93; 1980b, pp. 255-258; LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1980, pp. 20-22).

Although these arguments were still being developed (see LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1985), their principal implications are clear. First, if all the various "levels" or "regions" of a social formation are constituted through discourse and are liable to transformation through forces that are likewise constituted, we must replace the Marxist notion of the causal primacy of the economy with a "primacy of the political" (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1981, p. 22). This means that the capital relation is just as much a field of struggle as the political and ideological regions and that its so-called "laws of motion" are not governed by an extra-discursive "capital logic". Instead the movement of the economy depends on the contingent hegemonic articulation in a given society (*ibid.*).

Second, since any given society is characterised by a vast plurality of subjects who need not identify as class subjects, hegemony must be seen in terms of the discursive articulation of different subjects. Thus, if the dominant class or working class are to contest the role of "political, intellectual, and moral leadership", this must depend on their respective abilities to develop a political project recognised by other subjects in society as essential to realize their own particular interests. Further, it requires an "organic ideology" that can serve as a shared ideological frame of reference in which a plurality of subjects can redefine and negotiate alliances to advance that project (cf. LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1981, pp. 21-22).

This raises the crucial distinction between "political hegemony" and "organic ideology". There is no doubt that political leadership is won or lost in the context of "intellectual and moral reform". But there is a danger that "political hegemony" and "organic ideology" are conflated. Whilst the development of an appropriate ideological cement is the field *par excellence* of the creation of shared meanings, "common" sense, etc., political leadership works on these meanings in various ways to generate particular projects or national-popular programmes that require specific resources, policy initiatives, forms of mobilisation, etc. One cannot reduce Fascism or Nazism as hegemonic projects to the role of

"corporativism" and "race" as hegemonic principles (LACLAU, 1977, pp. 120-22). They also involved quite specific programmes of political action designed to advance specific class and "national-popular" objectives. In addition to "intellectual and moral reform", the fascist movements needed to reorganise the Italian and German state apparatuses to implement their projects of national regeneration.

Finally, a discourse-theoretical approach along these early lines raises issues about the limits of hegemony. Although Laclau and Mouffe noted that there are specific conditions of production and reception of discursive practices, there is no attempt to theorize these conditions beyond the assertion that they should be considered as other discourses (LACLAU, 1980a, p. 87). The conditions of reception are almost wholly ignored. Yet, as Gramsci himself was careful to observe, there is a world of difference between historically organic ideologies and ideologies that are arbitrary, rationalistic, or "willed" (GRAMSCI, 1971, pp. 376-377). Moreover, however plausible a given hegemonic project may appear in terms of its intended articulation of class and non-class subjects and demands, it will only become "directive" to the extent that strategically significant forces support it and likely sources of resistance are neutralised.

Hegemony and the Logic of the Social

In their chief work, *Hegemony and Socialist Politics*, Laclau and Mouffe built on these earlier remarks and concluded that the concept of "hegemony" introduced a new logic of the social that is incompatible with the basic assumptions of traditional Marxism (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1985, p. 3). More accurately, their post-Marxist account of this "logic" of the social required them to re-think the meaning of hegemony along with some other basic assumptions of Marxism. For they use the concept of hegemony so loosely and apply it so widely that it is often hard to distinguish it from more inclusive concepts such as discourse, the social and the political. The basic assumptions they claim are subverted by this new logic are: (1) the classist privileging of the proletariat's role as an agent of fundamental change; (2) the statist view that the state is the crucial site for implementing radical changes and that its activities must be expanded; (3) the economist claim that a successful economic strategy will also secure desired political effects; and (4) the argument that there must be a revolution that concentrates power so that society can then be "rationally" reorganized (LACLAU;

MOUFFE, 1985, p. 177). To these four assumptions they counterpose the logic of the social, i.e., the claim that the social has an open, unsutured character and that neither its elements nor its totality have any pre-given necessity. Their approach entails that the social has no positive essence: it has only a "negative essence" that consists in its essential openness.

In this sense, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* starts out from the claim that social relations can only be differentiated in terms of the specific discourses that endow them with meaning. In this context, they nonetheless assert that discourses include more than language: they also involve material practices. Indeed, they insist that articulation should not be reduced to pure linguistic articulation but must penetrate the materiality of institutions, rituals and practices through which a discursive practice is established (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1985, p. 109). They then distinguish between the general field of the interdiscursive and specific fields constituted by particular discursive practices. The general field of the interdiscursive is a complex series of "elements" available for integration into specific discourses. The latter fix the meaning of these elements in relation to an overall discursive system and thereby transform them into relatively fixed "moments" in that discourse. But they also argue that no discourse can totally fix the meaning of these moments – there is always polyvalence and a surplus of meaning and thus a potential for articulation with other discourses (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1985).

These general reflections have obvious implications for society. On the one hand, a fully closed, self-identical social formation is impossible. Even if individual identities and micro-social relations are unstable, it is hard to see how a fully sutured society could exist. But this does not mean that society is totally impossible (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1985, pp. 110-13, 122, 127). For, given that parts are merely elements rather than fully fixed and that they can be articulated in different ways, relations can exist among them with the result that societies are tendentially constituted as an ensemble of totalizing effects in an open relational complex (1985, p. 103). Indeed, without partial fixity, no differences would be possible: there must also be nodal points or privileged points of reference for articulation. Society only exists as attempts to realize the impossible, to produce fixity despite discursivity.

Society never manages to be identical to itself, as every nodal point is constituted within an intertextuality that overflows it. The practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points that partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant

overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1985, p. 113).

Because neither its individual elements nor its overall articulation can provide a founding moment for the social totality, Laclau and Mouffe insist that social identity depends on the contingent pattern of hegemonic articulation in an unstable social system. They define articulation as any practice that establishes a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. In turn, emptying "discourse" of its customary linguistic connotations, they simply define it as a structured or relational totality resulting from articulation (1985, p. 113). In this sense, it differs little from the concept of social practice. Indeed, Laclau and Mouffe insist that articulation should not be reduced to pure linguistic articulation but must penetrate the materiality of institutions, rituals and practices through which a discursive practice is established (1985, p. 109). Yet they have little to say about these institutions, rituals, and practices, except to interpret them as sedimented discursive practices.

The link with hegemony is established through an expanded concept of the political. For their analysis implies that politics occurs anywhere and everywhere that there is contingency. There is no surface that is not constantly subverted by others and thus no unique, clearly demarcated space of politics (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1985, pp. 179-81). Political (or hegemonic) discourse operates on a field of relatively open elements that have not yet been so sedimented that they can be reproduced merely through repetition rather than continuing articulation. In this sense, it cannot be localized within the state or in any other single power centre (or "nodal point") but occurs across the whole field of discursivity. Some nodal points may become the focal point of many totalizing effects but, since a unitary society is impossible, no single hegemonic centre can emerge. Indeed, given that there is always a plurality of power centres that coexist in specific relational and conjunctural contexts, any one of these is always limited in its effectivity by other nodal points (1985, pp. 139, 142-3). There is a certain ambiguity here in so far as the hegemonizing force can secure its hegemony only through relatively distinguishing its hegemonic discourse from the discourses that are being hegemonized. For, if its discourse was not distinctive, there would be no field of differences to be hegemonized; if it was totally distinct, however, then hegemony would be impossible, and the would-be hegemonic discourse would merely co-exist alongside others (1985, pp. 134-5). In this context, instability in the socially constituted frontiers that divide antagonistic

forces are basic factors for establishing hegemony. For they provide the material on which a hegemonic discourse can operate. In the absence of antagonism, there could perhaps be a bureaucratic reorganization of elements – but not hegemony. But, if the resulting frontiers were fixed, they could not be re-articulated through a hegemonic discourse. Instead they could be connected only through a simple chain of equivalences in which different positions were treated as equivalent in their political effects (1985, p. 136).

In arguing that society is impossible, Laclau and Mouffe do not, let us repeat, rule out the possibility of partial, provisional "totalizing" projects. A social formation can become a totality in so far as a hegemonic discourse can establish clear frontiers by constructing a chain of equivalences that distinguishes what is beyond the hegemonic formation as its (antagonistic) other (1985, pp. 143-4, 292). Since there is a multiplicity of social logics that must be constantly re-articulated and re-negotiated, however, there is no final point at which a balance will be definitively achieved (1985, p. 188). Society tries to construct its identity on the basis (and in the face) of the multiplication of social spaces and the diversity of institutions; it rests on compromise, on the precarity of every antagonism, on the opacity of all social relations (1985, pp. 191-2).

Laclau and Mouffe argue that society is "impossible" because it can never be fully itself, self-identical and self-closed (1985, p. 127). In developing this argument, they claim to be moving beyond positivity, i.e., to deny that any social identity could ever be a full, self-constituted identity. For every social identity is constituted through a difference from which it can never fully distance or separate itself. There is no social identity "fully protected from a discursive exterior that deforms it" (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1985, p. 111). At the macro-level, this means that society is intelligible in terms of contingent relations among its institutions, organizational forms and agents that are the product of a hegemonic articulation that establishes frontiers in opposition to other social relations. Thus, a social formation with a unique determinative principle is simply impossible. Indeed, although there is a discursive logic of the social, society itself is not (and could never be) an ultimately intelligible and rational object (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1985, p. 254).

Moreover, if the only properties that entities (apart from abstract existence) have are the product of discursive practices, then Laclau and Mouffe could claim to have discovered the philosopher's stone. Following their logic, one could discursively turn base metal into gold or convince those laughing at the emperor's fine new clothes that he really was wearing them.

Indeed, as they themselves insist in their reply to a critique by Normal Geras (1987), the function of a stone as a projectile is clearly discursive (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1985, pp. 82-85). One might well add, although they did not, that it is its own inherent properties (or natural necessities) which make a stone a better projectile for some purposes than cotton wool. Moreover, let me note that it is not just "natural" objects that have such objective qualities. For "social" phenomena also have many emergent properties and tendencies that give them distinctive capacities and liabilities whose existence may not be acknowledged but which still have a powerful influence on social life. We should not allow a quite legitimate rejection of the so-called "metaphysics of presence" to lead us down the slippery road towards a denial that, to the extent that social phenomena exist, they can have definite properties, powers and liabilities that are reproduced to the extent that these phenomena are reproduced.

Yet there is a Derridean "trace" even in this constructivism. For Laclau also suggests that the real is the "ungraspable margin" that limits and distorts the discursive constitution of the objective. And he adds that there is an insurmountable asymmetry between the real and concept: "the real, therefore, will only show itself in the distortion of the conceptual" (LACLAU, 1988, p. 17-18). This suggests that the properties of entities (not just entities in abstracto) do penetrate the conceptual field. This indicates the confrontation between theoretical and evidential propositions, the latter being produced in and through an intervention in the real world and which, therefore, contain its imprint in ways that are not directly knowable. Moreover, unless one accepts this view, notions such as experience and learning could have no meaning and would be merely solipsistic and self-referential. Not even Laclau and Mouffe want to go this far and, if they did, it would render senseless Laclau's argument that class reductionism was plausible in Marx's time because the categories of class and class struggle "corresponded well enough to that which was occurring in the field of his historical and political experience" (LACLAU, 1988, p. 24). But, if we accept this "constructivist realism", we must consider how the real comes to be both "present" and "absent" in discourse and what this implies for experience, learning and strategic conduct.

Indeed, Fred Mouzelis suggests, "because of their excessive fear of reifying institutional structures, Laclau and Mouffe go to the other extreme and analyse practices in an institutional vacuum" (MOUZELIS, 1988, p. 116). It almost seems as if they are so hesitant about attributing reality to socially unacknowledged conditions, emergent evolutionary properties and unanticipated consequences of discursive practices, that they prefer to focus on

the psychodynamics of hegemonic mobilization and the discursive constitution of interests and identities of what they themselves see as the empirical referent of society, namely, individuals (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1985).

It has also been suggested that, in dismissing the distinction between institution and agency, Laclau and Mouffe create more problems than they solve. As Mouzelis notes, either they must smuggle institutional complexes in without acknowledging this and so fail to conceptualize how they both facilitate and constrain action; or they must consistently ignore institutions and thereby fail to deal with the constitution, persistence and long-term transformation of global social formations (MOUZELIS, 1988, p. 113). As it is, they concentrate their critical fire on reconstructing the concept of hegemony and showing how articulatory practices constantly construct and deconstruct self-identities, subject positions, nodal points; social and political spaces, and so on. But the conditions of existence of which practices are both sustained and limited by the more permanent institutional structures are never spelt out.

The closest Laclau and Mouffe come to delineating an overall context of articulatory practices and subject positions is in their talk of "discursive formations" and the more general "field of discursivity". But these notions are so vague and so inadequate to deal with the institutional complexities of modern society that the two authors do not use them in any serious, systematic manner. In fact, when obliged to refer to the broad features of capitalist formations and their long-term transformations, they revert, as Norman Geras rightly pointed out (1987), to such conventional Marxist concepts as exploitation, commodification, the labour process, civil society, capitalist periphery, etc., and even the dreaded concept of "society" from time to time! How are the above concepts, which Laclau and Mouffe freely use, connected with discourse analysis? The connection is never made clear, and the gap between the two types of concepts creates a much more glaring dualism than that found in the Marxist texts that they so vehemently criticize (MOUZELIS, 1988, pp. 114-15).

Contrary to Laclau and Mouffe's empty realism, there is genuine scope for a transcendental enquiry both about the real world in general (its stratification, its internal complexity) and about specific entities (that they exist, they have specific natural properties, they are characterized by powers and liabilities, they manifest tendencies, and so forth). Although we have no direct access to these properties, they are both constraining and facilitating in relation to other entities and they are indirectly accessible to knowledge. It

sometimes seems that Laclau concedes this latter point when he appeals to experience to explain his own political development (LACLAU, 1988, pp. 12-13) or advances the more general claim that the plausibility of knowledge is indicated by its "verisimilitude" (LACLAU; MOUFFE, 1987, p. 102).

Another problem posed within discourse analysis is the micro-macro linkage. Despite its claim to be a universal analytic, discourse theory has tended to focus on subjects, identity formation and related issues (cf. ROSENTHAL, 1988). However, as one moves from the socially amorphous interaction among individuals in "brief encounters" through more structured group and organizational conduct to the configuration of institutional orders and the tendential emergence of "society effects", one moves further and further away from social relations that can readily be analysed in terms of individual subjectivity. In dealing with the macro-field we must take account of new types of articulation such as the structural coupling between co-evolving institutional orders that form part of each other's "social ecology"; the distinctive logics of organizations; patterns of strategic selectivity; and the structural constraints entailed in conditions of existence. This list is not exhaustive: its aim is simply to suggest that there's more to social life than discourse or and subversive practices. Perhaps there is nothing that inherently rules out a discourse-theoretical account of moments of the social but hitherto they have been neglected by its principal practitioners. A significant indicator of this is the past failure of Laclau and Mouffe to suggest any specific institutional mechanisms or organizational forms that might underpin the sort of radical and plural democracy which they advocate with such passion. To rely purely on the persuasive power of an inherently unstable hegemonic discourse carries little conviction.

For both argue that the social formation is the incomplete product of contingent articulatory practices (cf. LACLAU, 1988, p. 15). Its relative unity (if any) is not the necessary product of a single essential principle (a "cause without cause", i.e., an apodictic foundation). Society results from an emergent, provisional, unstable and non-necessary correspondence among different social elements. Laclau and Mouffe insist that this correspondence is discursively constructed: it is neither logically necessary nor just empirical. In focusing on discursive (i.e. meaningful) articulation, Laclau and Mouffe ignore the various unintended, unanticipated aspects of social order. Thus, their approach is one-sided.

This one-sidedness is reflected in their account of how the social order comes to be articulated. In effect they reduce this to the specific forms of articulation of subjects in terms

of their identities (interpellation) and the construction of chains of equivalence among identities and interests. In this context, Laclau and Mouffe focus on politically effective discourse where this refers to effectivity in political mobilization. Moreover, even here they neglect the conditions of reception of discourse in favour of the discursive mechanisms of its production; where they do discuss issues of reception, they do so in terms of a recurrent, insatiable psychological "lack" (cf. LACAN). Thus, the appeal of a hegemonic project is effectively reduced to its significance for the individual psyche - its capacity to establish a link between the logic of the social and the logic of the unconscious (LACLAU, 1987, p. 333; cf. ŹIŹEK, 1990). This marks no real advance on Poulantzas's appeal to "class instincts" (POULANTZAS, 1975, pp. 16-17) or Foucault's resort to "plebeian spirits" and, in so far as it refers only to the individual psyche, offers no purchase on collective mobilization.

Discourse Theory and Cultural Political Economy

If valid, the post-Marxist approach of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe represents a fundamental challenge to cultural political economy (CPE) – on which, see Sum and Jessop (2013). Individually and together they have developed a coherent set of linguistic and discourse-analytical tools to analyse politics and hegemony and to provide a theoretical rationale for a radical pluralist democracy that breaks decisively with economism and class reductionism.

Although this equation of the social and discourse is a foundational ontological claim, it is presented as anti-foundational and anti-essentialist. This is certainly useful in critiquing "hard political economy", i.e., the naturalization and fetishization of economic and political relations as objective facts of social life. This position also vastly expands historical contingency and hence the scope for agents and strategies to make a difference. Yet this ignores the emergent, path-dependent specificities of various institutional orders and their forms of articulation in favour of a pan-politicist ontology that insists on the permanent possibility of re-activation of sedimented structures. This introduces another form of essentialism. It reduces the social to politics such that every social space is either actually politically contested or, although "sedimented" (i.e., stabilized, naturalized), can be politically re-activated (LACLAU, 2005, p. 154). This goes beyond a claim about the primacy of the political (which depends on the existence of extra-political regions or spheres) to dissolve any

ontological distinction between the political and other fields (cf. NORRIS, 2006). It does so on the grounds that such differences are constituted semantically and that their boundaries are inherently unstable. Presumably this also holds for any emergent, extra-discursive structuring effects of such semantic distinctions. This ontological and epistemological anti-foundationalism leads Laclau and Mouffe to abandon any critical and effective account of the relations between semiosis and structuration in a social world beyond discourse. In this respect, it risks becoming a "soft economic sociology" (see Table 1).

Table 1

CPE between the Constructivist Charybdis and Structuralist Scylla

Constructivist Charybdis	Structuralist Scylla
Grasps semiotic-material construction of social relations, reveals their social embedding, and notes the performativity of semiosis	Grasps the *distinctiveness* of specific economic categories and their structured/structuring nature in wider social formations
But finds it hard to define specificity of economic relations vis-à-vis other relations - because they are all equally discursive in character	But reifies such categories, regards economic structures as natural, and views agents as mere *Träger* (passive bearers) of economic logics
Strong risk of idealism, defining economic relations in terms of their manifest *semiotic content*	Strong risk of economic determinism, explaining economic processes in terms of *'iron laws'*
'Soft Economic Sociology'	*'Hard Political Economy'*

Source: Sum and Jessop (2013, p. 181)

The impact of their work depended on a specific theoretical and political conjuncture when classical Marxism was in yet another crisis and provided a convenient foil for their post-Marxist linguistic (discursive) turn. This turn was more of a thematic extension of post-structuralist linguistics into a terrain where Marxist and liberal democratic theoretical and political discourses previously dominated. This is evidenced by the fact that most of the concepts deployed by Laclau and Mouffe are borrowed from other theoretical currents. "Discourse", "discourse analysis", "moment", "genealogy", "articulation" and "regulated dispersion" all derive from Foucault. "Floating signifier", "empty signifier", "overdetermination", "suture", and "nodal point" are taken from Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis and the work of the Slovenian psychoanalyst and political enfant terrible, Slavoj Źiźek. "Paradigm" and "syntagm" come from Saussure; "sedimentation" from

phenomenology; and Derrida delivers "undecidability", "deconstruction", "logic of supplementation" and "never fully closed structures" (cf. ANDERSEN, 2003, p. 48-9). There is no parallel systematic appropriation, re-articulation, and recontextualization of concepts from political economy or critical social science more generally. Instead, where reference is made to phenomena in these domains, they are introduced from ordinary language or lay social scientific observations and employed in an ad hoc manner. Lest these remarks be misunderstood, I do not oppose the appropriation and recontextualization of concepts from other disciplines or currents of thought – this is part of the normal process of scientific development. My criticism has two targets: first, these concepts are deprived of their external referents; and, second, the borrowings are asymmetrical – focusing exclusively on the semiotic rather than structural moment of social practices and their emergent effects.

Because these concepts are borrowed, it is easier to disembed them from their discourse-centred deployment and recontextualize them in cultural political economy. Three especially useful concepts are sedimentation, sutures, and nodal points.

- Sedimentation refers, in a Husserlian context (1954[1936]), to the naturalization and institutionalization of social relations, which occurs as their origins are forgotten, so that are reproduced through dull repetition rather than deliberate articulation (LACLAU, 2005, p. 154; cf. TORFING, 1999, pp. 69-71; GLYNOS; HOWARTH, 2007, p. 116). This can be reversed through a new hegemonic articulation that deconstructs, re-politicizes and re-articulates sedimented relations.

- The concept of suture (MILLER, 1966) refers to the inevitably temporary nature of attempts to bind different elements and relations together, despite their differences and distinctions. Consistent with its metaphorical connotations, a suture is a short-term fix that is bound to dissolve. This metaphor can be applied in other ways to social, semantic, institutional, and spatio-temporal fixes, which are key concepts in CPE.

- "Nodal points" are provisional and unstable centres that emerge from the primordial flux of social relations to provide temporary points of reference for the contingent articulation of social relations and attempts to suture them into relatively stable, sedimented ensembles.

Given their pan-politicism, Laclau and Mouffe insist that power cannot be localized in the state or some other power centre but occurs across the whole field of discursivity. This argument is, of course, familiar from Foucault's critique of state-centred theorizing and his emphasis on the micropolitics of power (FOUCAULT, 1980; 2008). For Laclau and Mouffe, it follows that hegemony is "free-floating" and must be articulated everywhere and in all directions (1985, p. 139). Moreover, because there is always a plurality of power centres, any one of them will be limited in its effectiveness by the others (1985, pp. 139, 142-3). This argument is important but can be extended beyond discourse to nodal apparatuses, dispositifs,[3] or points of crystallization where dominant principles of societal formation and domination are anchored.

This generates an arbitrary account of the social world that ignores the unacknowledged conditions of action as well as the many and varied emergent properties of action that go un- or mis-recognized by relevant actors. It ignores struggles to transform the conditions of action and modify emergent properties (and their feedback effects on the social world). And it is tempted towards the voluntarist vacuity of certain lines of discourse analysis, which seem to imply that agents can will almost anything into existence in and through an appropriately articulated discourse. What blocks this voluntarism is the existence of competing discourses.

CPE offers a "third way" between a structuralist Scylla and a constructivist Charybdis. It rejects the conflation of discourses and material practices and the more general "discourse-imperialism" that has influenced social theory for three decades. And it explores the dialectic of the emergent extra-semiotic features of social relations and the constitutive role of semiosis. In particular, it applies a consistent evolutionary approach to discourse as well as institutionalism. It explores the conditions of existence of variation, selection, and retention in sense – and meaning-making as well structuration. It seeks to explain why some discursive articulations get selected and become sedimented to be contested at a later date. And it also seeks to explain why some properties of institutions have enduring effects at different scales of action – see Sum and Jessop (2013).

[3] Summarizing and seeking to inject some coherence into Foucault's unsystematic but broadly consistent reflections on dispositifs, I suggest the following extended (re)definition: a dispositif comprises a problem-oriented, ensemble or assemblage of (1) a distributed apparatus, comprising institutions, organizations and networks; (2) an order of discourse, with corresponding thematizations and objectivations; (3) diverse devices and technologies involved in producing power/knowledge; and (4) subject positions and subjectivation (cf. SUM; JESSOP, 2013, p. 208).

One consequence of this CPE approach is that the economy cannot be adequately conceived (let alone managed) as a "pure" economic sphere that reproduces itself in total isolation from the non-economic and that can therefore determine non-economic spheres in a unilateral manner. At least some of these extra-economic conditions and forces must be integrated into economic strategies to make them feasible. The operations of the economy are co-constituted by other systems and co-evolve with them: these include technologies, science, education, politics, law, art, religion, and so forth. They are also articulated more generally to what Habermas called the lifeworld. The latter comprises all those identities, interests, values and conventions that are not directly anchored in the logic of any particular system and that provide the substratum and background to social interaction in everyday life.

Moreover, insofar as these extra-economic mechanisms also reproduce the contradictions and dilemmas inherent in the economic mechanisms of the capital relation, they further expand the scope for agency, strategies and tactics to shape the course of accumulation and the manner in which these contradictions and dilemmas are expressed. This is why the more successful accumulation strategies are often connected to hegemonic projects that link economic success to the national-popular (or some equivalent) interest that aims to mobilize a broader social constituency behind the growth strategy. This extends in turn the influence of accumulation via its modes of regulation to the overall character of social formations.

Thus, overall, there is no single and unambiguous "logic of capital" but, rather, several such logics with a family resemblance. Given the open nature of capitalism's overall dynamic, each accumulation regime and/or mode of regulation imparts its own distinctive structure and dynamic to the circuit of capital – including distinctive forms of crisis and breakdown. This in turn requires any analysis of the improbable nature of capital accumulation to take agency seriously. Thus, it is essential to combine critical semiotic analysis with the critique of political economy.

On the other hand, although CPE emphasizes that all social phenomena, including the economic, are discursively constituted and never achieve a self-reproducing closure, isolated from other social phenomena, it also insists on the contradictory, dilemmatic, and antagonistic nature of the capital relation. This makes soft cultural economics inadequate. To neglect these features of social relations would be to subsume the economic under the general rubric of the socio-cultural and thereby lose sight of the distinctive materiality and overall logic of the

capital relation. The economy should not be dissolved back into society (or culture) as a whole. This is the tendency in Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism, which illustrates the temptations of a constructivist Charybdis. The economy has its own specificities that derive from the distinctive extra-discursive properties of its various forms – cf. Slater (2002), on the key role of the commodity and property forms in differentiating the economy from other social relations. Thus, successful economic governance depends on the co-presence of extra-economic as well as economic forms and on extra-economic as well as economic regularization.

Concluding Remarks

Laclau and Mouffe developed a self-proclaimed "post-Marxist" account of social practices and social cohesion in terms inspired by linguistics and discourse theory. Although many of their ideas are drawn from these two disciplines, they have extended the concepts of discourse and discursive practices beyond language as such to all the ways in which social relations are endowed with meaning and articulated to each other. In this sense, all social relations can be considered as discourses. They justify this "exorbitation" of language on three main grounds: first, that linguistics shows how differences are essential to understanding entities and their limits; second, that there is no essential difference between the systems of differential positions found in speech and the extra-linguistic or extra-discursive actions to which they are linked; and, third, by virtue of this indifference, linguistic objects lose their specificity and linguistic analysis can quite legitimately be extended to the whole field of discourse as an ensemble of relational logics embracing more than language (LACLAU, 1988, pp. 25, 27).

In terms of their logic of discovery, Laclau and Mouffe rely on the somewhat metaphorical use of linguistics to explore the field of discourse. This is justified, as we have noted above, by appealing to the more general applicability of the logic of differential articulation theorized in linguistics. But rather than pursue the general logic, Laclau and Mouffe still draw almost exclusively on linguistic concepts rather than on other approaches to articulation. Laclau and Mouffe stress that discourse is not simply the "text", not just "language" and "parole", not just ideological elements: it is "the ensemble of phenomena in and through which social production of meaning takes place" (LACLAU, 1980a, p. 87). In

this context, it is regrettable that the discourse–theoretical approach of Laclau and Mouffe slides all too easily from a general conception of discourse as the production of social meaning to a particular focus upon ideological discourse to the exclusion of economic, legal, military, administrative, and other discourses and then emphasises the "discourse of discourses" involved in the production of hegemony itself. For this slippage forces them back to the "text" and seems to reduce hegemony to an effect of various interpellative mechanisms considered in isolation from their conditions of production or reception.

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Resumen

Ernesto Laclau y Chantal Mouffe exageraron los aspectos textuales de las prácticas sociales en sus reflexiones post-marxistas. Ellos desarrollaron una conexión entre prácticas sociales y cohesión social inspirados en algunos términos provenientes de la lingüística y de la teoría del discurso. Su trabajo muestra un rechazo creciente al reduccionismo economicista y de clase, a la vez que enfatiza en la construcción discursiva contingente y contestataria de la sociedad. La contingencia es la precondición de la hegemonía, es decir, la base en la acontecen las luchas por la hegemonía y la construcción del populismo. En ese sentido, ellos reemplazan la noción marxista de la primacía causal de la economía por la "primacía de lo político". Esto lleva a un anti-fundamentalismo discursivo, según el cual es imposible construir una sociedad unificada porque todos los significados y las identidades son contestados y sus fundaciones institucionales son potencialmente reactivadas. Este artículo concluye comparando esa exorbitancia del lenguaje con una más limitada aproximación de economía político-cultural que ofrece una "tercera vía" entre estructuralismo e idealismo. Este enfoque explora las condiciones que modelan la variación, selección y retención de producción y estructuración de sentidos e significados. Con esto se busca explicar por qué algunas articulaciones discursivas son escogidas y acaban sedimentadas, para posteriormente ser contestadas; y por qué algunas propiedades de las instituciones tienen efectos duraderos en diferentes escalas de acción.

Palabras clave: Ernesto Laclau; Análisis Crítico del Discurso; La Exorbitancia del Lenguaje; Hegemonía; Economía Político-Cultural.

Resumo

Ernesto Laclau e Chantal Mouffe exageram os aspectos textuais da prática social em suas reflexões pós-Marxistas. Eles desenvolveram uma interpretação das práticas sociais e da coesão social em termos inspirados por linguistas e pela teoria do discurso. Seu trabalho rejeitou o economicismo e o reducionismo de classe, dando ênfase à disputa e à contingência na construção da sociedade. Contingência é a pré-condição da hegemonia – o terreno no qual as disputas pela hegemonia e a construção do populismo ocorrem. Neste sentido, eles substituem a noção Marxista de casualidade da primazia da economia com a "primazia do político". Isso leva a um discursivo anti-fundacionalista no qual é impossível construir uma sociedade unificada porque todos os sentidos e identidades são contestados e seus fundamentos institucionais são potencialmente re-ativados. O artigo termina por comparar essa exorbitação da linguagem com uma abordagem cultural e política da economia mais limitada, que oferece uma "Terceira via" entre o estruturalismo e o idealismo. Explora as condições que moldam a variação, seleção e retenção do sentido - e da construção de sentido – tal como da estruturação. Essa abordagem busca explicar porque algumas articulações discursivas são selecionadas e sedimentam-se para serem contestadas posteriormente e porque algumas propriedades das instituições têm efeitos duradouros em diferentes escalas de ação.

Palavras-chave: Ernesto Laclau; Análise Crítica do Discurso; A Exorbitação da Linguagem; Hegemonia; Economia Político-Cultural.