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THE DISLOCATED UNIVERSE OF LACLAU AND MOUFFE:
AN INTRODUCTION TO POST-STRUCTURALIST DISCOURSE THEORY

ABSTRACT: *Post-structuralist Discourse Theory is an approach to political analysis that reformulates Marxist theory so as to emphasize structural contingency and openness. Whereas classic Marxian sociology is rooted in economic processes that "structure" society and ideas, post-structuralist Discourse Theory emphasizes the absence of any determinative principle. Thus, it radicalizes an ongoing shift in Marxism away from economic essentialism towards indeterminacy. The ideological superstructure becomes ever more important at the expense of the economic base; class struggle and production relations lose analytical and strategic purchase in favor of a complex and integral form of politics; there are no deeper, natural foundations determining how society is organized and structured. Post-structuralist discourse-theorists argue that this orientation leads to a more satisfactory analysis and critique of political practice than is possible through positivist behaviorism or orthodox Marxism. Assessing that claim requires a survey of the hermetic terminology in which post-structuralist discourse-theorists often express their ideas—the discourse, as it were, of discourse-theorists—exploring their use of Marxist sociology, structuralist linguistics, psychoanalysis, populism research, and various currents of political theory.*

Keywords: *Gramsci; intersubjectivity; Laclau; Marx; Marxism; Mouffe; populism; post-structuralism; psychoanalysis; hegemony; discourse.*

In the course of a stimulating engagement with Vivien Schmidt (2017) and Colin Hay (2017) in the pages of this journal, Oscar Larsson (2015) has made the case for a post-structuralist approach to the study of political ideas, distinct from the more prevalent discursive-institutionalist and constructivist-institutionalist approaches advocated by Schmidt and Hay. Yet Larsson does not actually review much post-structuralist theory while making his argument. He presumes his reader to be relatively familiar with the matter at hand, and sometimes glosses over highly complex concepts at breakneck speed. Those who are no *cognoscenti* of Continental philosophy are left behind, and may find themselves cut off from the gist of his argument. Larsson's article does not stand alone in this regard. Many valuable attempts to mainstream post-structuralism have a rather high entry level (e.g., Rogers 2009; Howarth 2010; Carstensen 2011; Diez 2014). This essay is an addendum to these important undertakings, as it offers a crash course in post-structuralist theory.

Of course, there are already many excellent introductions to post-structuralism. In particular for post-structuralist Discourse Theory (PSDT)—the brand of post-structuralism on which Larsson draws, which is most systematically mainstreamed in political science and sociology, and on which I will focus in this essay—there are numerous accessible book-length overviews (Smith [1998] 2012; Torfing 1999; Howarth 2000; Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Andersen 2003; Sjölander and Payne 2011). But many of them are somewhat outdated, missing recent developments in the literature. Most came out prior to the publication of Ernesto Laclau's *On Populist Reason* (2005a), which is arguably on an equal footing with Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001) as a foundational text in Discourse Theory. And even the more recent and up-to-date overviews

usually limit themselves to enumerating PSDT's main principles. They summarize its ontological framework and its epistemological stance, but steer clear of ongoing debates in the literature and refrain from discussing the variety of analytical approaches that have been developed to operationalize it.

It therefore seems to me that the moment is right to put PSDT in the spotlight once more. In times when populism seems omnipresent, revisiting a theory that has not just deeply marked the academic understanding of populism but also the political practices of actual populists may be a worthwhile endeavour (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014, 121-22; Errejón, Mouffe, and Jones 2016; Stavrakakis 2017; Valdivielso 2017; Mouffe 2018).

The first three sections of this essay correspond to PSDT's three main sources of inspiration: Marxist theory, semiotics and (post-)structuralist linguistics, and psychoanalysis. They discuss, respectively, PSDT's conception of the social world, its notion of "articulation," and its interpretation of "subjectivity." The fourth section treats PSDT's theory of political practice. The fifth examines PSDT's view of populism and democracy, and the sixth discusses the variety of analytical practices that have been inspired by PSDT.

I. MOVING PAST MARX

At its simplest, Discourse Theory is a post-structuralist reformulation of Marxian social theory (Sim [2000] 2013, 1-5) aimed at emphasizing structural contingency and openness. Whereas classic Marxian sociology is rooted in economic processes that "structure" society and ideas, the ontology of PSDT is, like post-structuralism in general, based on the absence of any determinative principle. Thus, it radicalizes an ongoing shift in Marxism away from orthodox economic essentialism towards indeterminacy and a political logic (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001, 1-88). The ideological superstructure becomes ever more important at the expense of the economic base, and class struggle and production relations lose analytical and strategic purchase in favor of a complex and integral form of identity politics.

Before their own breakthrough, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, PSDT's founders, viewed Antonio Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony as the culmination of this shift (Laclau and Mouffe 1981). In Gramsci's philosophy, "historical blocs" coalesce around ideas and values, which form a "collective will" that achieves "hegemony" on the "ideological terrain" (Laclau & Mouffe [1985] 2001, 66-67). Crudely put, Gramsci emphasizes intellectual debates and political struggles, with Marxism's traditional economism playing only a minor role, although Gramsci does assert the strategic necessity that the unifying principle of "collective will" must have a class nature (ibid., 69-71). Gramsci's contribution is therefore effectively to postpone the class dimension of Marxism, to push it away into the background, while ultimately retaining its decisive role.

The issue Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau 1977; Laclau and Mouffe 1981) pondered at the beginning of their careers was why Gramsci insisted on that last point. Why did he merely play down the class component of Marxism instead of doing away with it altogether? Why is social organization necessarily a result of relations of production? Conversely, why would one need a theory of hegemony if, in the end, society is organized through determinative economic principles? Post-structuralism led Laclau and Mouffe to reject these inconsistencies and the Gramscian premise of "economic determination in the last instance" from which they sprang (Townshend 2004, 270). "Discourse Theory" (PSDT) was the result of this move, which is usually identified with the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001), although some point to Laclau's (1983) earlier essay, "The Impossibility of Society" (Wenman 2003, 582-83).

In PSDT, social organization no longer necessarily involves class or any other essential principle, economic or otherwise. There are no deeper, natural foundations determining how society is organized and structured (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001, 149).

Cleavages, divisions, structures, and formations in the social sphere can take many forms, and the principles around which they are aggregated do not necessarily have a class basis, nor an economic or any other form of deeper grounding. The strata upon which the topology of the social world rests are contingent historical constellations. Discourse theory does away with all forms of essentialism and rejects the idea that social phenomena can be traced to an underlying principle. For Laclau and Mouffe, hegemony presupposes an open and clear field that can be hegemonized in an infinite number of ways, free of prior determinations.

The radicalism of this *tabula rasa* can be read from the negative reactions that *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*'s "post-Marxism" immediately drew from more orthodox Marxists (Wood [1986] 1998; Geras 1987; Mouzelis 1988). Their objection was that the absence of any underlying principle determining the structure of the social effectively destabilizes every form of societal organization. If every form of social structuration is groundless, and therefore non-necessary, contingent, and open to change, it follows that society has no definitive or natural form, no default mode. Thus, not only is class essentialism done away with, dialectical teleology is abandoned, too: society has no direction, no fixed future, no historical phases or eras, nor is it ever finished. In discourse-theoretic vernacular, it is said that all social structure is "dislocated": internally incomplete, conditional, accidental, and transformable. Mainstream Marxists took umbrage at this suggestion.

II. FROM MARXISM TO LINGUISTICS: ARTICULATION

Even if their reactions were sometimes permeated with hostility and bitterness, the core question these Marxists asked was legitimate: If there are no underlying principles organizing the social, why is there nevertheless social organization? How would Laclau and Mouffe explain that there is such a thing as society at all?[1] However, the implicit suggestion that *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* could not account for social structuration, was overdrawn. While Discourse Theory declares a finished society axiomatically impossible, it supports and even requires the existence of an incomplete one. The reason for this is the central place played by the principle of "articulation" in its ontology.

Articulation is the idea that people give meaning to the world around them by combining and connecting certain words, objects, ideas, and concepts in specific ways when they speak or act. When such combinations are repeated over and over again, the patterns they constitute start forming a stable structure, which we eventually recognize as the social world (Marchart 2014, 276-80). Since such patterns are, of course, what Discourse Theory calls "discourses," this entails that all social structure is discursive in nature (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001, 104-6, 113, 134-35). That last statement is often misunderstood. It does not involve solipsist doubt about the material character of the world around us, nor is it an idealist claim positing that nothing escapes language and ideas. What it implies, instead, is that nothing necessarily follows from the material character of the world, that there is no meaningfulness outside discourse as a subjective practice.[2]

PSDT, like most forms of post-structuralist theory, has developed a highly specialized jargon that allows arguments of this type to be formulated in a more rigorous and precise fashion. The exposition of articulation offered in the previous paragraph, translated into discourse-theoretical idiom, would say that "signification" is a product of the "articulation" of certain "elements" as "moments" that are "dispersed" in a specific pattern. When such

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[1] Laclau and Mouffe ([1985] 2001, 111, 122; Laclau 1983) did famously say that society is impossible, but this ill-famed quote is in fact nothing more than a poetic way of reiterating their point that it is impossible to fully "suture" the social fabric, closing it without threads, imperfections, or exclusions. It is most certainly not an endorsement of the worldview behind Margaret Thatcher's claim that "there is no such thing as society." Rather, their point is precisely to remind us that there is always an alternative (Dean 2013).

[2] The difference between both statements is best captured by Heidegger's distinction between "existence" and "being" (Townshend 2004, 271-73).

"dispersions" become "regular" through continuous "iteration," the "discourses" they constitute become "hegemonic" "structurations." This implies that there are no "extra-discursive" structures beyond "hegemony." Those conversant in Foucauldian theory will spot the strong influence it had on Discourse Theory's conceptual apparatus (Foucault [1969] 2013, 40-43).

The concrete functioning of the principle of articulation is clearest at the micro level. Neither the word *dagger* nor the object has an innate, absolute essence of meaning independent of how it is articulated. In many cultural contexts, the dagger is a symbol of adulthood. In a judicial context, it might be a murder weapon. To an antiquities collector, it might be a valued possession. And in a sports context, a dagger is a game-winning shot. The signified depends fully on the context in which it is used.[3] Before it is articulated, "dagger" is an element that can acquire an infinite number of meanings. Its physical condition does not point to or even constrain its meaningfulness. Only after it is articulated with other elements in a discourse does it, together with these other elements, become a meaningful discursive moment. This signifying mechanism also holds for classes, institutions, economic practices, cultures, and all other social forms. Their meaning depends on the web of discursive relations and connections of which they are part, and a reconfiguration of this web implies a shift in what they mean and hence what they are. This reasoning is heavily indebted to structuralist, Saussurean linguistics: a sign is meaningful because it is part of a network of other signs, which all bestow each other with meaning. Laclau and Mouffe of course add to this the post-structuralist caveat that these networks are never finished and always open to change and transformation (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001, 112-13), thereby destabilizing the relation between signifier and signified.

The macro-level political consequences of the principle of articulation will be discussed in the fourth section, when the concept of antagonism is introduced. At this point, it is the post-structuralist emphasis on openness that poses an issue. If social structures are indeed discursive networks, as just discussed, and if these networks are all permanently and necessarily "dislocated," as seen in the first section, then what is to stop an individual firebrand from radically rearticulating the moments of the discourse that constitutes our contemporary neoliberal economy, instantly transforming it into a socialist one, all on his own? What stops a parent from snapping his fingers and transforming the institute of parenthood? Why can't athletes or scientists articulate the rules governing their professional activities as they prefer? In theoretical terms, how can the ideas that all social structure is discursively articulated, and that all discourses are dislocated, be squared with the social stability we experience on a daily basis? Why are there "regularities" in "dispersion," rather than random and constant social flux?

III. SUBJECTIVITY IN DISCOURSE THEORY

Many social scientists have argued that *stricto sensu*, PSDT condones the bizarre and counterintuitive scenarios sketched at the end of the previous section. They contend that its ontology allows social change to be effected by subjects rethinking and re-articulating the existing structures as they see fit. All that is necessary to transform society to its very core is to speak and act in a slightly different fashion. This would, of course, be a huge weakness for the theory, as the notion that social change is at everybody's fingertips is the polar opposite of our day-to-day experience.

Several scholars have in fact tried to rectify this alleged deficiency by merging PSDT with Discursive Institutionalism, an approach to ideational analysis that they claim is better at

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[3] Which effectively makes the signifier/signified distinction redundant. Indeed, PSDT scholars usually speak only of signifiers (Laclau 2004, 316). But for the reasons elaborated here, maintaining the Saussurean distinction is helpful.

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capturing societal continuity and stability (Moon 2013; Panizza and Miorelli 2013). Yet the charge that PSDT suffers from a "problem of institutions" is not accepted by most post-structuralist scholars, including Larsson, who see it as based on a misunderstanding (Hansen 2014; Larsson 2015; Jacobs 2018).

At the core of their counterargument stands PSDT's conception of the subject. While social change through discursive re-articulation is supported by PSDT, a sovereignly acting and fully self-aware "Cartesian" agent is not. PSDT theorizes subjectivity as a structural phenomenon, meaning that it takes one's identity to consist of a combination of structural positions that are external to oneself (Hudson 2006; Larsson 2015, 187-91). Hence, one cannot just modify the social structures of which one is part, as to do so would be to step outside one's own identity. I myself, for instance, cannot voluntaristically decide to think capitalism out of my lifeworld, no matter how much I might want to. That is because many aspects of my identity are part of the structures that compose capitalism. I work for a wage, my food and clothing are produced in a capitalist economy, and many of my moral, aesthetic, and ethical attitudes are permeated with moments that belong to capitalist discourses. I cannot simply exchange these positions for other ones, as they are all that I am as a subject. PSDT does not theorize any form of extra-discursive subjectivity outside these "subject positions": there is no mental world or psychology beyond the discursive structures that make up the social world. Thus, there is nothing beyond these subject positions that could motivate me to make such an exchange.

The consequence of this reasoning is that for PSDT, all forms of subjectivity are intersubjective (ibid., 179-84, 187-91). There are no ideas and thoughts that are purely individual and personal; they are all products of our social environment. Larsson (ibid., 192-93; see also Jacobs, 2018) rightly argues that this is not just a crucial difference between PSDT and Discursive Institutionalism, but that it renders them all but incompatible. Yet even though this theoretical maneuver elegantly prevents PSDT from postulating that everyone can live in whatever world they like just by fantasizing it into being, it has two controversial consequences that have instigated substantial academic debate.

First of all, there is a risk that this reasoning re-introduces the old dialectical-materialist teleology of Marxism through the back door. If subjects are nothing but structural phenomena, their actions are fully moulded and determined by those structures. Casting the agents of social change as fully interior to the structures they change would imply that all social change is evolutionary and based on principles internal to the structure, and hence pre-determined and teleological (Hansen 2014, 285-86). PSDT avoids this risk through the psychoanalytic idea of the "split subject." A subject is a configuration of multiple discourses, so-called "subject positions," but those subject positions do not form a perfect unit. Like all other structures, the subject as a structure is dislocated, incomplete, and unfinished. The subject positions constituting a subject as a structure overlap, contradict one another, leave empty areas, fit awkwardly,… In other words, subjects are both "overdetermined" (in some situations, contradictory subject positions that are part of a subject's identity are activated simultaneously) and "underdetermined" (in some situations, no position is activated) (Howarth and Torfing 2005, 16-17). A progressive university professor might feel overdetermined in debates on capitalism, as his or her opposition to its oppressive features is brought into conflict with his or her participation in the system through wage labor. In a debate on artificial intelligence, on the other hand, he or she may face underdetermination, if he or she does not occupy subject positions that motivate a stance on this issue. When such under- or overdetermination occurs, the subject experiences first-hand the dislocated, contingent nature of all social structure, including his or her own identity. This "lack" of a full identity is a shocking, traumatizing experience, which drives the subject to act in order to cover up the "traces" of his or her subjective imperfection. Such actions, undertaken to hide

the contingent and incomplete character of the social, are either overdetermined or underdetermined by the existing discursive structures, and, as such, are a catalyst of social change not predetermined by the existing structures (Hudson 2006, 300-304; Hansen 2014, 289). This way, PSDT avoids teleology, but of course the introduction of the controversial discipline of psychoanalysis is contentious in its own right (Cederstrom 2007; Boucher 2009, 93).[4] Marxists in the Althusserian tradition often focus on this issue, as the "split subject" is one of the principal points of division between Laclau's Discourse Theory and Althusser's theory of ideology and interpellation, which presupposes a complete and finished subject who is fully structurally determined (Andersen 2003, 52; Boucher 2009).

A second controversy sparked by PSDT's emphasis on intersubjectivity revolves around historicism. Subjectivity is not only defined as an inexhaustive and non-matching collection of structural "subject positions"; it is additionally taken as a given. There is no juncture where a subject picks his or her preferred subject positions from the available batch. He or she is always already part of the structure, "thrown" into it at birth so to speak (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 79, 129; Howarth 2013, 99; Marttila 2015, 101-2). Social structure, therefore, has no cause, no moment of radical foundation *ex nihilo*, as there is no subject prior to social structure that could initiate structuration. The potential chicken-and-egg problem faced by all dialectical solutions to the structure-agency dilemma—if subjects change structures and structures condition subjects, which comes first?—is cut off at the knees by firmly putting structure first (Laclau 1990, 36, 60, 83-84; Laclau 2004, 332). Yet critics contend that this "historicist" move causes "contradictions" and "ethical relativism" (Boucher 2009, 10-16, 82, 233), and that it paralyzes political action (Miklitsch 1995; Sumic 2004, 196-97).

IV. HEGEMONIC POLITICS, ANTAGONISMS, AND EMPTY SIGNIFIERS

The theory of hegemonic politics that Laclau and Mouffe derive from blending Marxism, postmodernism, structuralist linguistics, and psychoanalysis is consolidated around the concept of "antagonism." Antagonism, in a nutshell, implies that the articulation of elements as moments often, or according to some interpretations even necessarily (see Thomassen 2005a; 2005b; 2019 for an overview of this controversy), leads to a structural dualism, where two large discursive structures stand opposite each other, dividing the social world into two antagonistic camps.

To explicate the process through which articulations produce antagonism requires a closer look at the internal organization of discursive structures. For Saussure, relations between signs result in neat, balanced, and finished networks. These networks are similar to fishing nets, with the nodes as signifiers and the ropes as the connections between them. Yet as we have seen, for PSDT such networks are incomplete, unbalanced, and uneven. This imbalance results in the clustering of discursive relations around a center: a dense area in the network where many connections between signifiers (so-called "signifying chains") come together. Therefore, post-structuralist discursive networks end up looking more like spider webs than like fishing nets: a bunch of peripheral signifiers are connected through discursive chains to more central signifiers, and these chains eventually all run to the heart of the network. The signifier occupying that heart, often called the nodal point, relates to many if not all the moments in this network. Every discourse has one or several such nodal points, which together define how this discourse is organized and which meanings it articulates (Laclau and

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[4] Strictly speaking, this is not really an "introduction." Since subjects are theorized as structural phenomena, they too are dislocated, imperfect, incomplete, and contradictory, like any other discursive structure. However, the notion of a "lack" does not apply to other structures, and hence, it is still fair to speak of the introduction of psychoanalytic theory, although it is arguable to what degree this introduction is in fact warranted (Cederstrom 2007).

Mouffe [1985] 2001, 135-39). The discourse of liberal democracy is for instance defined through nodal points like freedom, rule of law, equality, and elected representation.

A different metaphor to explain this process, less biological and more astronomical, would compare the crystallization of discursive structures around nodal points to the effect of gravity after the Big Bang. Because the discursive universe is assumed to be uneven and not perfectly balanced, like the physical universe after the Big Bang, there are denser and less dense regions, regions where the (discursive) elements are located closer to each other and regions where they sit further apart. In the denser areas, (discursive) gravity pulls elements closer and closer, until they form recognizable structures around a very dense core: a star in astronomy, a nodal point in Discourse Theory. A few elements that were originally situated in the less dense areas of the (discursive) universe, meanwhile, never become integrated in any structure but instead float around undeterminedly in outer space ("the field of discursivity"). When they collide with a (discursive) structure, however, they can completely ravage (dislocate) its internal organization.

Counterintuitively, nodal points are less meaningful than other signifiers. Instead, they imbue the signifiers connected to them with meaning. By entering a central position in the discursive network, a nodal point empties itself of meaning in order to signify the signifiers around it (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001, 113). A classic example of this phenomenon is the signifier "democracy." The term is hard to define in its own right, but it has a crucial role in determining the social meaning of elections, parliaments, government, liberalism, sovereignty, and so on in liberal-democratic discourse.

The signifiers that form the discursive network around a nodal point, meanwhile, relate to each other and to the nodal point itself in two unique modes. One mode, the "logic of difference," separates signifiers from one another. The other, the "logic of equivalence," connects them with one another. The former breaks up discursive chains, declaring the unconnected signifiers distinct and different; the latter builds up discursive chains, declaring the signifiers connected in them coterminous and equal. In sociological terms, the logic of difference renders the world around us more complex by introducing more nuances, shades, variations, and differences. The logic of equivalence, on the other hand, makes the social sphere simpler, by boiling down the structure of the world around us to a limited number of key distinctions (ibid., 130; Laclau 2005a, 77-78). For example, a rhetoric linking free trade to growth, productivity, development, poverty relief, and wealth involves a logic of equivalence. Reversely, pointing out that growth and increased production are in fact not desirable in all circumstances and that free trade has unequal distributive effects which create economic winners and losers, involves a logic of difference.

Neither logic can ever be fully dominant. A structure solely governed by the logic of difference would be a perfectly saturated Saussurean structure, a neat fishing net of the sort that PSDT assumes to be impossible a priori. A structure solely governed by the logic of equivalence, on the other hand, would not be a structure at all, as its moments would not be distinguishable from one another. The building blocks with which a structure could be assembled would be one undifferentiated clump (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001, 129).

Yet while logics of equivalence can never completely dominate a space of representation, they can come very close, with but a single core difference remaining. It is here that "antagonism" comes in, as this crucial difference dichotomizes the discursive structure, splitting it into two opposed camps. In this scenario, all signifiers in the discursive chain have been equated to a single nodal point, which levels up to become an "empty signifier" (Laclau 1996; 2005a, 69-72; 2005c; Laclau 2000a, 54-55). Empty signifiers represent the entire discursive chain of signifiers connected to them, and are completely void of any meaning particular to themselves. The only sense an empty signifier has is that it stands on one side of the dichotomy dividing the discursive structure in two camps. It is

literally nothing but "not the other thing"; it represents nothing but the central contradiction that now marks the entire discursive sphere. The spider web has been divided in two halves, with the empty signifier at the center of the web representing the antagonism between the two halves.

An intuitive example of an empty signifier is *terrorism*. It divides the world between the forces of good and evil, erasing any nuances that may exist within those camps. While the term itself is all but undefinable, the concrete properties of what is grouped through its chains of equivalence are erased. When an act is labelled as "terrorist", its actual traits are blurred out and replaced by a mythical set of characteristics – it no longer matters whether we are talking about al-Qaeda or the Red Army Faction, about a lone radicalized right-winger or a vast criminal network. The same goes for terrorism's unnamed antagonistic adversary. A wide variety of political and social systems are equated through antagonism to terrorism, their actual properties being replaced by vague notions such as liberty, democracy, solidarity, and freedom (which are of course empty signifiers in their own right). The complexities of both the terrorist act and what it is aimed at are lost when they are related to the empty signifier "terrorism" (Thomassen 2005a, 292-93).

The construction of such dichotomies, such "antagonisms," is absolutely central to Laclau's theory of hegemonic politics. He sees antagonism both as the fundamental ontological basis of all hegemony (Marchart 2014, 277-80) and as the most important activity in real-life politics (Laclau 2005a, 154, 231). With the first claim, Laclau means that by constructing antagonisms, articulations prevent the dislocated nature of all structure from destabilizing the discursive structure they articulate. All discourses that have the ambition to organize the social world hence necessarily involve an antagonistic delimitation that functions as the frontier, the "limit" of this discourse (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001, 122-27). The second claim entails that grasping "populism" is the royal road to understanding and doing politics (Laclau 2005a, 67; 2005c).

Both contentions have instigated furious debate, the former about whether antagonisms are really the only way in which the "dislocated" and incomplete nature of all discursive structure can be mastered and controlled (Laclau 1990, 38-41), the latter about the practical role of populism in politics (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; Stavrakakis 2017). The rest of this section will focus on the first, more theoretical controversy, while the next section will tackle the second one, regarding Discourse Theory's view of politics as a practice.

With regard to the theoretical controversy, it should be noted that Laclau and Mouffe's original claim, that all structure is delimited antagonistically, is no longer really accepted in the literature. Not only does postulating that all discursive frontiers are antagonistic in nature result in an "unpleasant and extremely counter-intuitive" conception of the social world (Norris 2002; Norris 2006, 117), it also introduces several logical paradoxes into the theory. Antagonism, for instance, is framed by Laclau and Mouffe as both the reason why all structures are inherently unstable and dislocated, and as the provider of temporary and contingent stability. Both obviously cannot be true simultaneously, as antagonism cannot be both the cause and the resolution of dislocation (Thomassen 2005a; 2005b).

Laclau's own solution to this conundrum was the introduction of a new category, "heterogeneity" (Laclau 2005a, 129-53; 2005b). Structures can be demarcated through antagonistic opposition, but they can also be heterogeneous and alien to each other, implying that one structure is not meaningfully related to the other. While a liberal and a protectionist discourse on trade are antagonistic to each other, both are heterogeneous to an orthodox Marxist discourse on economic production. More generally speaking, heterogeneity as a concept expresses the idea that meaning can only be achieved if some things are left meaningless. For a structure of moments to be meaningful, some elements have to be

excluded from this structure. These excluded elements can either be meaningful in another discourse, or they can be meaningless altogether. For instance, "the common good" is meaningful in a mercantilist discourse on trade but not in a liberal one, yet "allocation" is an economic signifier meaningless in all mainstream commercial discourses. Hence, while the discursive structures that we see as the social world consist of the equivocation and differentiation of signifiers, not all signifiers participate in this signification process. Some keep "floating" around undeterminedly (as was already foreshadowed at the end of the astronomy analogy earlier in this section). Many signifiers do become moments in signifying chains that produce meaningful antagonisms, but other elements have to remain heterogeneous to all structures in order to allow these signifying chains to be formed (Thomassen 2005a; 2005b). Hence, there are not just antagonistic, but also heterogeneous limits and boundaries.

Laclau's classic example of discursive heterogeneity is that of vagabonds, beggars, and the homeless, which have no place in the Marxist antagonism between the working class and the capitalist class (Laclau 2005a, 144-52). Meaningless elements can be reintroduced into a discourse, dislocating the existing discursive configurations, destabilizing the current social structures, and potentially effecting social change (Biegon 2017). Franz Fanon's reinterpretation of Marx's theory of revolution is based on the reintroduction of the excluded vagabonds, for instance (Laclau 2005a, 151-52; 2005b).

V. POPULISM AND DEMOCRACY

For Laclau (2005a), populism is about giving meaning to the political community; it is about the signification of "the people." A populist articulation involves the combination of isolated ("democratic") "demands" addressed towards the same institution or government into a chain through logics of equivalence. One of these demands will rise to the fore and come to represent the entire group of demands (which have now turned "populist"), thereby assuming the role of "empty signifier" (ibid., 72-73; 2005c).

A good example is found in the protest against a transatlantic trade agreement (TTIP) between the European Union and the United States, where proponents of a strong nation state, people concerned about environmental and food safety, left-wing anticapitalists, liberals with concerns about democracy and transparency, and people with anti-American sentiments rallied with each other in one movement built around the empty signifier "Stop TTIP." Very different demands, which in another situation would be completely incompatible, were fused together into one campaign through a populist articulation.

Populist demands, collectively represented by the empty signifier, divide the political space into two antagonistic camps: in one corner, the popular movement (which often casts itself as the entire people); in the other, the institution, organization, or government that is antagonized (which is often cast as an elitist, corrupt, out-of-touch establishment). This analysis has been an important inspiration for the wider field of populism studies, delivering the key insight that populism is not a full-fledged ideology in its own right, but rather a mode of operating on the ideological plane. It is a style of communicating an idea, rather than a self-sufficient set of ideas (Laclau 2005a; 2005c; Salter 2017, 116-17; Stavrakakis 2017, 527-28). Yet the conditionally positive appreciation of populism implied in this insight caused quite a stir. Staunch liberal purists disputed that populism could ever be a legitimate form of politics (ibid., 525-32), and even adepts of PSDT struggled with the question to what degree they could endorse populism as a political strategy. Is the normative, ethical stance that follows from a discourse-theoretic ontology one that endorses pluralism and democratic demands, and that valorises "particularism" and respect for individual identity? Or is it acceptable to vie for hegemony by attempting to "universalize" a specific political project through populist articulations?

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Laclau and Mouffe themselves oscillated between the two stances. Originally they were, in classically postmodern fashion, opposed to universalist politics (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001, 3; Boucher 2009, 114). But Laclau later moved to reject postmodern particularism (Laclau 1995, 20-58; Laclau 2000b, 208-9; Wenman 2003) and endorsed a form of socialist politics that capitalizes on the communicative potential of populism (Laclau 2005a; 2005c). Even Mouffe, whose single-authored work initially focused even more than Laclau's on citizenship, liberalism, and radical democracy, and who cast populism as a danger (Mouffe 1992; Mouffe 2000; Wenman 2003), later started combining her liberal-democratic ethos with populist strategies by focusing on the construction of "the people" in democratic, "agonistic" fashion (Mouffe 2013). Recently, she has explicitly promoted left-wing populism as a political strategy (Mouffe 2018). This perhaps slightly opportunistic *volte face* coincided with the success of left-wing parties drawing on the populist interpretation of their work, such as Podemos and La France Insoumise (Errejón, Mouffe and Jones 2016; Valdivielso 2017).

The question of whether democracy, pluralism, and particularism accord with populism, hegemony, and universalism also resonates in several more theoretical disputes. Chief amongst them is the debate about the status of hegemony. Is all politics necessarily hegemonic in nature, or is an alternative way of doing politics possible that is not captured by PSDT's theory of hegemony? Is workerist autonomism, for instance, merely a potential hegemonic project within the left, or does it genuinely escape hegemony theory, constituting a non-hegemonic form of politics (Prentoulis and Thomassen 2016, 227, 231-32)? Laclau and Mouffe would argue the former, but some claim that the time has come for the left to embrace a post-hegemonic type of politics (Beasley-Murray 2010; Arditi 2016; Cavooris 2017).

Related to this is the puzzle concerning the origin of hegemonic politics. Even if PSDT's theory of hegemony is seen as adequately capturing modern politics, it can be questioned whether politics has always been a game of hegemony, or whether there once was a non-hegemonic form of politics. According to Laclau and Mouffe ([1985] 2001, 152-71, 192-93), politics became hegemonic in nature only after what they call the "democratic revolution" of the nineteenth century. But such a historic reading of hegemony seems at odds with their own ontological principles, which target the notion of historical eras with core characteristics as essentialist (Boucher 2009, 108-110), and with their view of hegemony as the way all social structure is constituted (Arditi 2016, 18-22). This would mean that PSDT instead should be understood as a neutral metalanguage that can be used to describe all political contention across time and space. Yet this stance, in turn, jeopardizes the political project that Laclau and Mouffe fight for. Their idea of radical democracy is grounded in a reflexive, ethical approach to the game of hegemony, in which the democratic revolution, the promise of *liberté*, *égalité*, *fraternité*, is continuously deepened, reinterpreted, and debated, but fundamentally accepted by all, hegemonically (Mouffe 2013). Yet if PSDT's theory of hegemony is but a neutral and descriptive hermeneutic to understand how being is meaningfully constituted, it cannot form the basis for an ethics, let alone for a theory of citizenship (Žižek 2000, 229; Townshend 2004, 276). It is in that case nothing but a political-strategic manual that can be used by anyone interested in winning hegemony, regardless of his political colors; it is Machiavellian in the layman's sense of the word (Boucher 2009, 110-11).

VI. DOING DISCOURSE-THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

Let us at last tackle the question of how Discourse Theory is used in academic research.

The fact is that PSDT's ontological framework is rather hard to operationalize. It is usually considered far too abstract and general for direct application to a concrete case study. This "methodological deficit" (Howarth and Torfing 2005, 25,316-22; Townshend 2003) is not accidental. Mouffe and Laclau never intended for their thinking to inspire hands-on scientific research. The latter pleads "happily guilty" to not having developed a framework for applying Discourse Theory (Laclau 2004, 324) even while claiming that "hegemony [...] is

perfectly theorized in my work" (ibid., 322). He disputes the need for something like a methodology, speaking of "the myth of the case study" and the "myth of methodology" when advising his Ph.D. students, and favors a form of political science closer to political philosophy (Laclau 1991).

Consequentially, many studies drawing on Discourse Theory use it in a "thin" or "minor key" fashion (Townshend 2003; 2004, 285-86). Such thin renditions deploy Discourse Theory in combination with theories native to the terrain to which it is being applied. The resulting mix often sacrifices ontological and epistemological coherence for a more concrete and tangible understanding of the phenomena under investigation. A typical example of "thin Discourse Theory" is the rich literature on European integration and EU foreign policy that draws on PSDT (Diez 1999;2014; Larsen 2002; 2004; 2014; Waever 2005; Stavrakakis 2005; Rogers 2009).

This practice is common in sociology, international relations, and political science (Townshend 2003). In linguistics (MacGilchrist 2016; Zienkowski 2017) and critical media studies (Carpentier and De Cleen 2007; Phelan and Dahlberg 2011), on the other hand, analyses are often "thicker," more theoretical, and more abstract in nature, trading accessibility for rigor. In the study of rhetoric, finally, PSDT is mostly considered as a potential ontological infrastructure. Studies often take the shape of theoretical treatises looking at how PSDT meshes with the existing practices of rhetorical analysis (DeLuca 1999; Kaplan 2010). Recent years have also seen a proliferation of middle-range theories aiming to devise a methodology innate to PSDT itself. Such middle-range theories attempt to equip PSDT with tools and concepts that can connect its ontological framework with concrete case studies in a systematic and coherent manner. The most popular amongst them is the "logics" framework proposed by Jason Glynos and David Howarth (2007; Howarth, Glynos, and Griggs, 2016); others revolve around "discourses" (Marttila 2015), "hegemonic strategies" (Nonhoff [2006] 2018;2007; 2019; Herschinger 2012), "metaphors" (Biegon 2017), "ideas" (Carstensen 2011; Larsson 2015), and concepts borrowed from pragmatics (Zienkowski 2017).

The diversity of analytic and philosophical practices aggregated under the banner of Discourse Theory testifies that PSDT has not yet reached its "scientific adulthood" (Marttila 2015, 2). There is no commonly agreed, codified, correct way of doing Discourse Theory "by to the book." Instead, PSDT is at once a way of looking at the proliferation of populism, a dense political philosophy, a linguistic theory, a source of political inspiration, a political project in its own right, a stage in the development of Marxism, a perspective on political strategy, and a scientific-analytical approach, with not all of these guises necessarily being compatible with the others. But the fact that PSDT continually proves to be a valuable paradigm for political thought while simultaneously resisting canonization remains an indication of how powerful its core insights are.

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