DISCOURSE THEORY
AND CRITICAL MEDIA POLITICS

EDITED BY LINCOLN DAHLBERG AND SEAN PHELAN

Discourse Theory and Critical Media Politics

Also by Lincoln Dahlberg

RADICAL DEMOCRACY AND THE INTERNET (*with Eugenia Siapera*)

Also by Sean Phelan

SCOOPED: THE POLITICS AND POWER OF JOURNALISM IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND (with Martin Hirst and Verica Rupar, forthcoming)

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Contents

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Lincoln Dahlberg and Sean Phelan
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1

Discourse Theory and Critical Media Politics: An Introduction[1]

Sean Phelan and Lincoln Dahlberg

The signifier discourse is hardly an unfamiliar one in critical media, communication, and cultural studies. As a focal point of theoretical reflection, it may even be considered a bit passé – the residue of an earlier preoccupation with signification and language that has either been superseded by more fashionable theoretical vocabularies, or exposed for its inadequate attention to "real world" material concerns (Cloud, 1994; Philo & Miller, 2000). This objection could apply, in particular, to a discourse theoretical tradition whose foundational moment was the 1985 publication of Laclau and Mouffe's (2001), *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. The objection might be: "but hasn't all this ground been covered already?" "Given the range of already available texts,[2] do we really need another book about discourse in media and communication studies?" Our response to these objections is, naturally enough, an affirmative one: yes, another book about discourse is needed, one with a specific theoretical focus that systematically explores what we see as the underdeveloped relationship between post-Marxist discourse theory and what this collection calls critical media politics.

Discourse Theory and Critical Media Politics focuses on two key questions: what can be said about discourse theory in light of contemporary discussions about the "mediation" and "mediatization" of politics and social life? (Strömbäck, 2008; Thompson, 1996), and, reciprocally, what can be said about a critical media and communication studies in relation to present understandings of discourse theory? It explores this problematic by critically examining the discourse theory–media politics relationship from a range of media, communications, and critical political theory perspectives. Post-Marxist discourse theory, also sometimes dubbed "Essex School" or "post-structuralist" discourse theory (Howarth, Norval, & Stavrakakis, 2000), is associated primarily with Ernesto Laclau

or, in recognition of their landmark book, Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In addition, many of the graduates of the Ideology and Discourse Analysis programme established by Laclau at the University of Essex in 1982 (Laclau, 2000) have gone on to make significant theoretical contributions in their own right, often arguing both with and against their intellectual mentor (see, for example, Devenney, 2004; Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Norval, 2007; Smith, 1998). These and other theoretical interventions can be described as post-Marxist, in the sense of marking a clear break with many of the classical assumptions of Marxist analysis, particularly around class essentialism, while still drawing inspiration from Marxism. As Laclau and Mouffe (2001) observed:

> . . . if our intellectual project in this book [*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*] is *post*-Marxist, it is evidently also post-*Marxist*. It has been through the development of certain intuitions and discursive forms constituted within Marxism, and the inhibition or elimination of certain others, that we have constructed a concept of hegemony which, in our view, may be a useful instrument in the struggle for a radical, libertarian and plural democracy. (p. 4)

Given this interest in producing an emancipatory theory, we would expect Laclau and Mouffe to be appropriated in a range of critical media and communication studies approaches. The normalization of terms like "discourse," "articulation" and "hegemony" as staple keywords of critical media, cultural and communication studies may be traced, at least in part, to Laclau, particularly given his influence on some of the key figures in the disciplinary popularization of a discursive approach (see, for example, Hall, 1986a, 1986b; Grossberg, 1992; Slack, 1996). Nonetheless, it is perhaps symptomatic of an ongoing divide between empirical and critical theoretical, particularly post-structuralist, research traditions, that in other sub-fields such as political communication, Laclau's contribution as a political theorist has barely registered.[3] There is also the sense that, with some notable exceptions (see, for example, Carpentier & Spinoy, 2008), discourse theory is sometimes engaged with in a superficial way, consistent with what Hesmondhalgh and Toynbee (2008, p. 1) suggest is the fragmentary and haphazard appropriation of social theory in media studies. This book wants to redress this cross-disciplinary gap by systematically examining the relationship between post-Marxist discourse theory and other critical theoretical traditions in media and communication studies, particularly as they relate to politics, the political and, above all, the possibility of radical social transformation.

The conceptual vocabulary of discourse theory – which, at its simplest, offers a theoretical account of how social practices are constituted through political practices – is organized around a number of key concepts and philosophical assumptions that are considered in more detail later in this chapter. However, given the "frequently . . . undefined," "vague and sometimes obfuscatory" (Mills, 2004, p. 1) use of the term, it is perhaps important that we begin with a precise technical definition of how Laclau and Mouffe understand the concept of discourse. For them, discourse is equated with practices of articulation. As they put it:

> We will call *articulation* any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call *discourse*. (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 105)

The definition can be given a brief empirical illustration. The discursive representation of the Irish 2010 "debt crisis" articulated the possibility of a "contagion" effect in other Euro-zone countries such as Portugal and Spain, thereby positioning the "Irish crisis" as a relational element of a wider European and global "crisis." The Irish debt crisis retained its status as a particular crisis with its own nation-centric political dynamics and context. Yet, as an object of discourse, the Irish crisis was (and is) also constituted by, while simultaneously contributing to the constitution of, a wider discourse about a debt crisis in other European countries. This discourse was reproduced through a range of representational practices, including media reports (see, for example, Treanor, Inman & Moya, 2010), financial transactions and speculation, political deliberations at a European and national level, government reports, academic commentary, and so on. National and international media representations became a particularly important element in the discursive constitution of the crisis, with Irish government ministers blaming what they saw as the "doomsday" media coverage (Cullen, 2010).

The crucial theoretical point to note about Laclau and Mouffe's definition of discourse is how they understand this structured totality, where the identity of the Irish debt crisis is modified by its articulation with other discursive elements, as more than a linguistic totality. Drawing on Wittgenstein's "language games" metaphor, discourse is equated with the always partially fixed regularities structuring the links between linguistic and extra-linguistic practices (Laclau & Mouffe, 1990, p. 100). Contrary to enduring common sense uses of the term, discourse is therefore *not* simply conceived as a synonym for language. Rather,

Laclau and Mouffe reject any ontological distinction between linguistic and material practices, or, to formulate the point another way, any ontological distinction between meaning/signification and action (pp. 100–1).

This means that the rearticulation of the Irish crisis as part of a Euro-zone crisis was always already a material event, because once the articulatory practice of linking the fate of Europe to Ireland (and vice versa) became normalized in the media sphere and elsewhere, particularly among the all-important bond market traders, it became, in effect, the structured totality in which different social actors constituted the Irish crisis as a material-discursive object. This established a discursive context where the need to act "in the interests of Europe" had a disciplining effect on the actions taken by political and economic elites in Ireland and elsewhere, and which subsequently led to a contentious EU–IMF-sponsored "bail-out" of Ireland's state-guaranteed banking system in November 2010. The key theoretical insight to take from our example is how the language of the crisis cannot be ontologically separated from the material constitution of the crisis, as both the extra-linguistic and linguistic elements are material and always already have a constituting effect on each other.

This theoretical conception of discourse helps us understand the rationale behind Laclau and Mouffe's assertion of a post-Marxist identity. It represents a wish to interrogate what they see as the historical tendency of Marxist theory to assume a number of untenable ontological distinctions, including a distinction between material practices and ideas/language that has often been formulated, in more orthodox Marxist discourses, as a distinction between the economic/material "base" and the cultural/ideological "superstructure." Contrary to some readings of their work, Laclau and Mouffe retain a conception of a certain ("mere") materiality outside discourse (see further discussion in Chapter 2). Nonetheless, their dissolution of an ontological distinction between discursive and extra-discursive practices has been regularly criticized – sometimes simplistically – for its "idealism," "relativism," and "voluntarism" (Cloud, 1994; Geras, 1987; Rustin, 1988); and even for supplanting the metaphysical assumptions of Marxist theory – to some a "straw-man" Marxism – with a metaphysics of discourse (Joseph, 2002). The complex question of the relationship between signifying practices and materiality will be taken up by different contributors in this volume. The key point to underline, at this stage, is the confusion, and ontological disagreements, that can arise from a theorization of discourse that is fundamentally different to other research traditions.

We use the term "media politics" to refer to a broad, open-ended conception of how the political and politics in contemporary societies

are articulated through, and dependent on, the convenient shorthand that we call "the media." Our use of the term should be distinguished from a narrower focus on questions of media policy and regulation. As this book understands it, media politics is synonymous with what Marchart (in Chapter 5) characterizes as a more general "politics of the media."[4] The shape and boundaries of the object called the media are becoming increasingly blurred in the digital age (Couldry, 2009). However, in the context of this volume, it is important to preface any evaluation of different kinds of media by emphasizing how discursive practice is simultaneously a form of mediation (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. xi).[5] In one sense, this much has been clear ever since Kant showed how empirical experience is mediated by conceptual understanding. Yet, in another, there is, we think, an enduring tendency in media and communication research to bracket these fundamental ontological questions by assuming either an unproblematic distinction between mediated and unmediated forms of social practice (Thompson, 1996), or conflating representation with media representations only. Pragmatic analytical distinctions between politics and media politics may be unavoidable, and this volume is no exception in that respect. However, within the horizon of a discourse theoretical ontology, it is important to emphasize how representation is understood as constitutive, rather than merely reflective, of social practice. It is also crucial to underline how untenable it is to think of media "as a set of discrete objects" separate from "the individual" and "society" (Kember & Zylinska, 2010; also see Torfing, 1999), as typically presupposed in traditional mass communication models (for a more detailed discussion of the ontological condition of media practices, see Marchart's Chapter 3 discussion of mediality). Carpentier and De Cleen (2007) put the point well when they observe how, "from a discourse-theoretical viewpoint, media are seen not just as passively expressing or reflecting social phenomena, but as specific machineries that produce, reproduce and transform social phenomena" (p. 274).

This volume locates the signifier "critical media politics" in an interdisciplinary terrain intersecting, most obviously, the fields of media studies, communication studies, cultural studies, critical political theory, and media sociology. Critical media politics can be contrasted with the more conservative disciplinary identity "political communication," which, notwithstanding its increasing openness to a more fluid conception of politics (see Dahlgren, 2004; Street, 2001), still focuses primarily on elite political institutions, agents, and electoral processes. Our emphasis on the "critical" signifies theoretical approaches that accept the value-imbued nature of all practices and embrace normative, ethical, and

reflexive evaluations (for a more detailed discussion of discourse theory's conception of critique, see Chapter 2). It also signifies this volume's wish to contribute to the revival of a critical media studies, which is interrogative of its Marxist inheritance yet sceptical of the argument that concepts like ideology should be discarded (Corner, 2001).

The underdeveloped nature of media researchers' engagement with discourse theory has been mirrored by critical political theorists' relative neglect, at least in more recent times (Downey, 2008), of media studies' questions.[6] There is a moment in *On Populist Reason* that captures this disconnect in Laclau's work, one indicative of a more general inattention to specifically "cultural" questions (see Bowman, 2007; Carpentier & Spinoy, 2008). Discussing the significance of Tarde's nineteenth-century distinction between the "psychology of crowds" and the "psychology of publics," Laclau – directly quoting Tarde – notes how, in contrast to a crowd's location in the same physical space and time, the "new" category of public(s) exists as a "purely spiritual collectivity, as a dissemination of physically separated individuals whose cohesion is entirely mental" (Tarde cited in Laclau, 2005, p. 44). The quote is used by Laclau to support the point that "publics, in that sense, were unknown in the Ancient World and in the Middle Ages, and the precondition for their emergence was the invention of the printing press in the sixteenth century" (p. 44). Yet, despite the recognition of how print media's scaling practices were constitutive of these new publics (Barnett, 2003; Couldry, 2000), the categories of press or media merit no substantive discussion in Laclau's analysis of populism. The absence is a curious one for a discourse theorist, particularly given today's clichés about the media-driven nature of politics. It also points to a tension between Laclau's focus on ontological questions and the capacity of discourse theory to offer an adequate explanation of particular historical practices, a theme that is taken up by some contributors (see chapters here by Phelan and Simons).

Discourse Theory and Critical Media Politics aims to address the relative lack of attention given to media by discourse theorists and, with some obvious exceptions, the corresponding dearth of engagement with post-Marxist discourse theory in critical media politics research. The collection brings together an international and cross-disciplinary group of contributors who have been carefully selected for their expertise in relation to this aim. While focusing on different questions and drawing from different theoretical traditions, the contributions are linked by their shared interest in interrogating the relationship between discourse theory and critical media politics. The book begins with this extended introduction

that is primarily focused on giving a summary overview of discourse theory, with some empirical illustrations from critical media politics research and practice. To counter-balance the more abstract theoretical register of the introduction, Peter Dahlgren concludes the volume with an extended afterword that evaluates the book's problematic and contributions in terms of a critical media politics.

The remainder of this introduction is structured in four parts. First, we give a summary overview of how the concept of discourse has been articulated in media and communication studies, briefly noting some important ontological and methodological differences between post-Marxist discourse theory and other research traditions. Second, we consider the methodological disposition of discourse theory, and note the most significant applications of discourse theory in critical media and communication studies. Third, the core section outlines the central theoretical and political assumptions of discourse theory, organizing our overview around key conceptual sub-headings supported by empirical illustrations. We end with a short preview of the key thematic concerns of the book, noting how each of the chapters contributes to its overall logic.

Discourse, media, and communication studies

It is important to recognize that some of the assumptions of post-Marxist discourse theory have been present in the fields of media, communication and cultural studies since the 1970s and 1980s (see chapters here by Dahlgren, Gilbert, and Marchart). Laclau has often foregrounded the extent to which his work is anchored in an intertextual rearticulation and appropriation of the insights of others. Therefore it is hardly surprising that theoretical insights attributed to Laclau, or Laclau and Mouffe, resonate with a wider structuralist and post-structuralist turn in media and communication research (see Corner, 1998). This confluence of identities is exemplified, most obviously, in the work of Stuart Hall, whose own theorization of the concepts of discourse, representation, articulation, ideology and hegemony was developed with explicit reference to, among others, Laclau (Bowman, 2007; Hall, 1986a, 1986b; Marchart, 2002; Morley &Chen, 1996).[7] Hall and Laclau also share a common political project of reconciling post-structuralist insights with Marxist assumptions, while remaining committed to the possibility of radical social transformation.

Many names could be cited – Althusser, Lacan, Foucault, and so forth – in tracing the points of genealogical overlap between media studies and

discourse theory. The shared intellectual debt to Saussure and Gramsci is particularly salient. The importance of Saussure to Laclau's formulation of a relational account of social practice parallels the popularization of semiotic analyses of media and culture in the 1970s and 1980s (see the chapter here by Gilbert). The common engagement with Gramsci is indicative of the wish to redress the displacement of the political and cultural found in economistic Marxist analysis. Carpentier and De Cleen's (2007) call to "bring" discourse theory into media studies is therefore perhaps overstated; that conceptual insights attributed to discourse theory will often resonate with other theoretical iterations and vocabularies is not disputed. At the same time, the extensive deployment of Gramscian and post-structuralist terminology, particularly the concepts of hegemony and discourse, in media and communication studies can perhaps conceal the degree to which Laclau's theoretical project has been underutilized or misunderstood.

The articulation of the concept of discourse and the practice of discourse analysis in media and communication studies has, like the social sciences and humanities more generally, been influenced by different disciplinary trajectories. Two traditions are especially relevant here: one with its origins in linguistics and a tradition of concrete textual analysis, and another which is more macro in orientation and associated with the fields of cultural studies, literary theory, and – of particular importance here – critical political theory (Mills, 2004). These traditions are not discrete, and Saussure, Derrida, and Foucault, are perhaps just as likely to be cited in one field as another. In addition, Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) and others have shown how insights from other discourse analysis approaches, such as critical discourse analysis, can be methodologically articulated with post-Marxist discourse theory. Nonetheless, as in other disciplines, discourse analysis in media and communication research has been marked by a clear distinction between approaches that focus primarily on the analysis of linguistic and semiotic detail, and those that assume a more expansive focus on "the social" as a horizon of discourse.

The conception of a discourse analysis identity as grounded in close textual analysis has been articulated under different names that, although often interdisciplinary in character, are aligned with linguistic methodologies. These include critical linguistics, sociolinguistics, social semiotics, discursive psychology, rhetorical analysis, and conversation analysis. One of the most established methodological approaches, at least in European contexts and cultures, is critical discourse analysis, which has been widely appropriated in media and communication research. Critical discourse

analysis signifies a plurality of approaches which has been typologized in terms of the contribution of four key figures: the socio-cognitive approach of Teun Van Dijk, the discursive-historical approach of Ruth Wodak and the Austrian School, the critical realist and neo-Marxist approach of Norman Fairclough, and the political discursive approach of Paul Chilton (Blommaert, 2005). While broad similarities can be identified across traditions, these approaches differ from post-Marxist discourse theory in one fundamental respect: they all insist that the practice of discourse analysis *must* – if it is to be the basis of a rigorous social scientific practice – be methodologically grounded in a detailed and focused linguistic analysis of texts (Antaki, Billig, Edwards, & Potter, 2002).

We will concentrate here on Fairclough's individual and collaborative work, partly because of its extensive focus on media discourse and its congruence with Laclau's project of reconciling post-structuralist and Marxist identities. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) formulated perhaps the most sophisticated and ambitious theorization of critical discourse analysis, asserting a position explicitly opposed to the social ontology of Laclau. Their articulation of critical discourse analysis as a "transdisciplinary" (p. 16) approach draws on insights from various social and political theorists including Foucault, Bhaskar, Bourdieu, Harvey, Habermas, Halliday, *and* Laclau and Mouffe. Foucault is used to emphasize how "orders of discourse" (p. 59) are constitutive of social practice, while the discourse theoretical concepts of logics of equivalence and difference (see below) are applied at a syntactical and grammatical level. Chouliaraki and Fairclough nonetheless critique Foucault's conception of discourse for its abstractness, thus justifying the need for a more concrete linguistic analysis of texts. Fairclough (1995) makes a similar argument to distinguish critical discourse analysis from the "limitations" of semiotics, because the latter "does not systematically attend to detailed properties of the texture of texts" (p. 25). Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) articulate their "critical" identity as a commitment to what Bhaskar calls "explanatory critique," (p. 33), also drawing on Habermas' conceptualisation of critique as a process of deliberative inquiry between competing "validity claims" (p. 85).

Chouliaraki and Fairclough identify the social ontology of critical discourse analysis as critical realist, the implications of which Fairclough has explored further in other work (Fairclough, Jessop, & Sayer, 2004). The main theoretical significance of this approach, at least when compared to discourse theory, is its insistence on an ontological distinction between discursive practice and social practice. Chouliaraki and Fairclough follow Harvey (1989) and others by emphasizing the "dialectical" (p. 5)

relationship between discursive practice and social practice, suggesting it would be a mistake to see the categories as wholly discrete (see also Jessop, 2004). Discursive practice is conceptualized as an internalized "moment" (p. 21) of social practice, where social agents are both structured by, and structuring of, discursive practices. Thus, for example, the discursive presentation of a particular current affairs programme is distinguished from the wider horizon of social and cultural practices that structure the identity of the programme and broadcaster, such as its relationship with the formal political field, its relationship with other media identities, or the structural pressure of audience ratings (Fairclough, 1998). At the same time, by emphasizing the dialectical relationship between discursive practice and social practice, Fairclough underlines how social practice always has an internalized discursive aspect, thus articulating a theoretical conception of discourse that would reject any neat distinction between discursive and extra-discursive practices.

In concrete methodological terms, the discursive moment has been operationalized primarily through the close analysis of particular texts, which are typically examined with reference to a description of the relevant social context and explained with reference to the social theory(s) underpinning the analysis. This default methodological move has been criticized for reproducing a "linguistic bias" in critical discourse analysis and a "temporally closed focus" on discourse "which is there" in the text (Blommaert, 2005, p. 35). This generates something of a paradox for critical discourse analysis researchers. The official theoretical position may emphasize how the social context is always partly a discursive context. Yet empirical research is nonetheless routinely operationalized around a methodological distinction between text and context. Consequently, despite different attempts to transcend the text–context distinction, critical discourse analysis research – at least its typical application in media research – often reproduces a reified and static conception of context that demarcates the analysis of narrowly defined textual representations from the wider range of "social and cultural practices *which frame* [italics added] discourse practices and texts" (Fairclough, 1998). The comparative methodological strengths of such work should not be denied. Unlike a more methodologically abstract post-Marxist tradition, it facilitates a "thick description" of media textual norms and conventions that is often insightful and productive.

This brief assessment of critical discourse analysis is important here because its relationship to discourse theory is not discussed elsewhere in this collection and because its methodological uptake in media and communication research illustrates how discourse analysis has, in our

view, become sedimented in ways that are problematic from a discourse theoretical perspective. Four interlinked points are important. First, given a default methodological focus on discourse as a sphere of narrowly defined textual representations, a more expansive account of discourse analysis as equally applicable to the analysis of media production, distribution and consumption, has been underdeveloped. Second, a methodological focus on narrowly defined texts has reanimated a political economy critique of discourse analysis as materially deficient (Philo, 2007), which some have redressed through a Marxist approach that reinscribes an ontological distinction between language and materiality (Richardson, 2007). Third, discourse analysis has often been operationalized as a method-led approach, the pragmatic application of which comes after the construction of the research object and problematic. Fourth, a tight methodological focus on linguistic detail has become normalized, sometimes in ways that can become either illustrative of technical concepts (the limitations of which are often particularly clear when the research is produced by non-linguists) or simply affirmative of the critical propositions prefabricating the analysis (see Billig, 2003; Corner, 1998).

The picture we have sketched here of how discourse has been articulated in media and communication studies, and critical discourse analysis, is selective and stylized. It de-emphasizes, for instance, the importance of the different iterations of Foucault's work to media researchers (see, for example, Fiske, 1989; Kellner, 1995), as well as the contribution of the discourse theory tradition associated with Habermas (Calhoun, 1992). There is no space here for a considered discussion of either. However, it is important to note the significance of both Foucault and Habermas, either as figures of identification or disidentification, to the emergence of a post-Marxist discourse theoretical identity. The initial articulation of discourse theory acknowledged a clear theoretical debt to Foucault, particularly through Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) appropriation of the concept of subject positions. They lauded Foucault's extension of the concept of discourse to a much wider range of objects and social practices, while nonetheless critiquing what they saw as his ongoing commitment to a residual ontological distinction between discursive and extra-discursive practices.

Habermas, in contrast, is typically articulated as an Othered figure in post-Marxist discourse theory: the exemplar of various theoretical commitments that must be rejected. The differences between the latter, as represented by his influential theorization of the public sphere, and discourse theory will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. For now,

it is worth noting – to simplify their differences – that Habermas equates discourse with a type of rational communication that can be universalized: namely, theoretical and moral discourses through which truth and normative standards, respectively, can be arrived at (Habermas, 1990; 1993). This can clearly be opposed to the much more malleable and agonistic conception of discourse associated with post-Marxist discourse theory, which would see universal rationality as impossible beyond any hegemonic conception of universality.

Methodological articulations and dispositions

Despite the often cursory nature of the engagement, the work of Laclau/Laclau and Mouffe has been appropriated by some critical media politics scholars. This sometimes occurs in quite self-contained literatures. For example, the discipline of rhetoric – a discipline of increasing importance to Laclau – has been the site of an engagement with Laclau and Mouffe in US critical communications scholarship since the late 1980s (see, for example, Aune, 1994; Condit, 1994; DeLuca, 1999; and McKerrow, 1989). The most systematic articulation to date of a post-Marxist discourse theoretical approach to media politics has been the contribution of Carpentier, De Cleen, and their various co-authors (Carpentier, 2005; Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006; Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007; Carpentier & Spinoy, 2008).[8] They follow Smith (1999) in schematizing the significance of discourse theory on "three interrelated levels": as a social ontology, a political identity theory, and a theory of radical democracy (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007). They "transform" these theoretical insights into a model of Discourse Theoretical Analysis (DTA), emphasizing the value of discourse theoretical concepts as, pace Foucault, "toolboxes" (p. 266) of media and cultural research. We are sceptical of the value of packaging discourse theoretical insights into a DTA model, particularly since it recalls Billig's (2003) critique of how critical discourse analysis has been reified into an acronymized "CDA" identity. Nonetheless, Carpentier and De Cleen's work clearly situates discourse analysis on a more expansive methodological horizon than is typically the case in media discourse research, focusing on how research objects such as audience participation and the professional identity of media professionals (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007), rock concerts (De Cleen & Carpentier, 2010), and journalistic objectivity (Carpentier & Trioen, 2010), can be analysed in discourse theoretical terms. Carpentier and De Cleen situate their approach as a development of Torfing's (1999) earlier research agenda, which identified three "domains [of media studies] where discourse theory can be

put to work: (a) the study of discourses about the media and their place and function in society; (b) the study of discourses of mass media (i.e. of the form and content of the discourses produced by the media), (c) the study of media as discourse."

This collection wants to follow these earlier contributions by emphasizing discourse theory's value as a methodological framework for "problematizing" (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 167) the conditions of (im)possibility underpinning the construction of any research object. As such, we are less concerned with the question of systematic method-led applications than in critically exploring discourse theory's value, and limitations, as a critical theoretical framework for focusing methodological attention on the "radically contingent" and "contextualized" nature of social and media practices (Laclau, 1990, pp. 22–3). The underlying rationale of this methodological perspective is not simply to keep asserting the radical contingency of social practices as an illuminating research "finding" in its own right. Rather, the point is to focus critical attention on the blind spots and silences within existing social and media practices, so that the possibilities of a different kind of social or media order – in effect, a different regime of social objectivity – might be made more visible.

This emphasis on problematization draws on Glynos and Howarth's (2007) discussion of the methodological implications of discourse theory, which they characterize, also drawing on Foucault, as "problem-driven, rather than method- or purely theory-driven research" (p. 167). Problem-driven research "ought not to be confused with problem-solving research," they suggest, "as the latter tends to assume the existence of certain social structures or rules, as well as the assumptions of the dominant theories of such reality, and then operates within them" (p. 167). Glynos and Howarth's discussion of methodology focuses more purposefully on theoretical rather than procedural issues. They conceptualize research inquiry from within the horizon of discourse theory's overriding concern with the constitutive impossibility/possibility of any social practice (see below). Contrary to methodological approaches that simply assume the prior existence of a particular social structure, agent or object, discourse theory foregrounds their ontological precariousness, the "being" of which needs to be explained by the analyst rather than presupposed. As against simply describing the representation of a particular issue, a discourse theoretical approach would focus on how that representation – and the objects of discourse assumed by it – is made possible in the first place. Thus, to recite one of our earlier illustrations, critical methodological attention is focused on how the media, along with other actors,

have constituted the European/Irish economic "crisis," and the contestability of the discursive assumptions structuring the dominant media narratives and the discourse more generally.

This emphasis on the ontological dimension of social and political inquiry underlines the central importance of Heidegger's ontological/ontic distinction to Laclau's theoretical project (see Chapter 3 by Marchart).[9] The distinction structures Laclau's demarcation of "the political" from "politics," where the former, as the ontological horizon of all social practice (see below), is distinguished from the more conventional understanding of politics as a regional, institutionally based location of social life.[10] The failure to clearly recognize the structuring effects of this distinction is sometimes missed by critics who align Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of the social with a Thatcherite disavowal of society – as if the ontological impossibility of "society," as an object of analysis, implies a disavowal of the idea *and* materiality of a hegemonized social order. Laclau "plead[s] happily guilty" to the charge that his work has "concentrated on the ontological dimension of social theory rather than on ontical [i.e. empirical level] research," insisting that he has "located [his] theoretical intervention at the theoretical and philosophical level and it is at that level that it has to be judged" (Laclau, 2004, p. 321).

This insistence on the primacy of ontology is articulated in explicit opposition to "sociologistic" analyses, which, in Laclau and Mouffe's (2001, p. 2) assessment, typically assume the objective existence of objects of investigation that, as they see it, have political conditions of (im)possibility. Laclau's portrait of sociology can certainly be described as simplistic and self-serving. However, we think it would be a mistake to surmise (see Couldry, 2008) that a social theory, per se, cannot be articulated with discourse theory. Flattering assessments of sociological research may be hard to find in Laclau's work. Yet he has conceded that discourse theory can usefully gain from engagement with other theoretical approaches, including sociological ones (Laclau, 1990, p. 27). He would also recognize the pragmatic and empirical necessity of appropriating and working with positive terms and concepts, thus underlining the importance of asserting a methodological disposition that paradoxically both assumes and denies social objectivity (for further discussion of this point, see Chapter 2). This is an important point in the context of this book. It suggests the openness of discourse theory to articulation with other theoretical discourses in media and communication studies, rather than an imperialistic approach that overrides the existing concerns and frameworks of media researchers. At the same time, Glynos and Howarth (2007) note the danger of a theoretical eclecticism, where

insights and concepts are drawn together from different theories in an ad hoc fashion. They qualify their enthusiasm for cross-theoretical dialogue between discourse theory and other traditions by emphasizing the methodological importance of rendering concepts from different theoretical discourses commensurate with the ontological presupposition of radical contingency (see below). This is to say, for example, that nothing would preclude a discourse theoretical approach to media analysis being potentially articulated with a political economy approach, so long as any residual assumption of "the economy" as an ontologically distinct horizon of social life is expunged from the analysis (see further discussion in Chapter 2).

The political logics of discourse theory

Discourse theory has evolved from out of the articulation of a range of theoretical traditions, most prominently Marxism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and phenomenology. We cannot examine this evolution here in any detail (see Howarth, 2000; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). For the purposes of this book, and the particular benefit of readers less familiar with discourse theory, we will summarily outline some of the central theoretical logics and associated categories. Such a summary is, in itself, not a straightforward task. Laclau has emphasized how discourse theory "is not a closed system which has already defined all its rules and categories, but an open-ended programme of research whose contours and aims are still very much in the making" (Laclau, 2000, p. xi). Our overview of what Laclau has described as "a new vocabulary for politics" (Laclau, Avgitidou, & Koukou, 2008) is therefore selective, and summarizes our reading of the central concepts of discourse theory at this particular time, as relevant to the book's thematic.

Laclau and Mouffe's discursive understanding of politics is based on their conceptualization of hegemony, which they argue is "the central category of political analysis" (Laclau, 2001, p. 5; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. x). The standard glossing of the concept of hegemony – as a description of how consent is secured for a particular social order – will already be familiar to critical media and politics researchers. The popularization of the concept by Stuart Hall and others was directly informed by Laclau and Mouffe's post-Gramscian reformulation, a theoretical debt that is not always recognized in media and cultural studies (Bowman, 2007; Slack, 1996). The significance of Laclau and Mouffe's contribution has been to reconceptualize hegemony through a post-structuralist genealogical deconstruction of Marxist theoretical assumptions and

ontological analysis that posits the (quasi)-transcendental[11] question: what do the relations between entities have to *be* to make social objectivity and identity possible? (Laclau, 1990; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, pp. x, xii).

Radical contingency and constitutive heterogeneity

The most fundamental condition of possibility for social objectivity, according to Laclau and Mouffe and other discourse theorists, is radical contingency. "Contingency" describes how any entity is dependent on relations with other entities, rather than self-grounded. To give the point a simple illustration – one that could be made via other media studies approaches influenced by Saussure's structuralism – the identity of the media outlet, *The Guardian*, is dependent on its differential relations with other media identities (The BBC, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times,* the blogosophere, and so on), as well as a myriad of other elements that are articulated in every story it produces and every social relation it enters into. Drawing in particular upon the post-structuralist analyses of Derrida and Lacan, "radical" emphasizes that contingency is not simply empirical but logically necessary, because a fixed identity would effectively mean the end of identity and deny the possibility of new forms of identification. As such, there is always an Outside that cannot be positivised or named by the discourse in question: an ineliminable "heterogeneity," a surplus that escapes systematization and conceptual mastery (Laclau, 2005; Norval, 2004; Thomassen, 2005a). As such, heterogeneity (and radical contingency) is not only the condition of possibility for being, but also the condition of impossibility which subverts the full positivization of identity.

To presuppose radical contingency means accepting that there is no final, absolute ground, foundation or essence to identity, *except* for contingency itself. As such, necessity and contingency are mutually subverted and marked by an inescapable heterogeneity or, to use Derrida's term, undecidability (Laclau, 1990, p. 27; Laclau, 2004a, pp. 294, 309; Marchart, 2004, p. 60). Moreover, radical implies that this "mutual subversion [and contamination] of necessity and contingency is itself necessary" (Marchart, 2004, p. 61). Laclau and Mouffe (2001) initially conceptualized the ontological condition of radical contingency through the category of antagonism, which they described as signifying "the limits of every objectivity" (p. 125). The concept of antagonism is, as we will see, still of central importance to discourse theory. However, it is important to note that Laclau (2004) subsequently revised the assumption that antagonism is "more or less synonymous" with the

"the notion of limit" (p. 318). In retrospect, he suggests that the original theorization was marked by "two flaws": first, it overlooked how "antagonism is *already* a form of discursive inscription . . . of something more primary which, from *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* onwards, I started calling dislocation"; and, second, it wrongly assumed that antagonism is simply "equivalent to radical exclusion" (p. 319). In its revised form, Laclau suggests that "the notion of limit and of antagonistic limit do not overlap," while he also maintains that "not all dislocation needs to be constructed in an antagonistic way" (p. 319). The latter observation is a curious one, since it is difficult to cite any clear example of a non-antagonistic identity in Laclau's corpus. Moreover, discourse theory is premised on a series of radical dialectical relations, noted below, that seem to clearly support Mouffe's (2000, 2005) claim, and formerly Laclau's, about the inerradicability of antagonism to the constitution of being. This suggests that different understandings of the concept of antagonism are sometimes being deployed, and, in his contribution to this book, Marchart usefully distinguishes between antagonism as an ontological category and conflict as an ontical category. However, leaving aside the question of antagonism for now, the central point we want to emphasize here is how dislocation (see more below) has become a key discourse theoretical concept for talking about the ontological condition of radical contingency. More recently, Laclau (2005) has developed his theoretical account by giving additional emphasis to the "*constitutive* role" of "heterogeneity" (p. 223), as a way of describing a radical, non-representable outside (see more below) that he believes cannot be adequately captured by the concept of antagonism, which, in contrast, is described as a form of representation.[12]

The mutual subversion, or dialectic, of necessity and contingency is constituted by way of a series of homologous relations: consensus/dissensus, equivalence/difference, ground/abyss, identity/non-identity, inside/outside, linguistic/extra-linguistic, positivity/negativity, possibility/impossibility, presence/absence, suture/dislocation, and universal/particular. This dialectic is a deconstructionist rather than Hegelian one: that is, it signifies an essential and overdetermining negativity, or undecidability, between opposed elements that can never be positivized (Laclau, 1990, pp. 21, 36–7; 1996a, p. 56; Laclau et al., 1999, pp. 136–7). We could even say this is a radical dialectic, in that there is always a radical outside (heterogeneity) to the dialectical relation itself, such that the dialectic is not "all," nor can there be any progress towards a unity of being all.[13] Thus there can be no transcending of the relational distinction between identity/non-identity in the form of a third positive term,

because both terms of the binary are marked by a failed positivity that – contra Hegel – produces in turn a "failed transcendence" (Laclau, 2005, p. 244).

This complex philosophical argument can be given a brief empirical illustration that anticipates some of the theoretical issues that will be explored in more detail later in this chapter. A radical dialectical perspective would highlight the ideological blockages underpinning the demand that the political enactment of an "us" versus "them" dynamic be resolved in the form of a new consensually agreed identity. Think, for instance, of the routine appeal to "bipartisanship" in US politics, where Democrats and Republicans are encouraged to leave behind their differences in the interest of a bipartisan identity constructed around the "common good." A discourse theoretical approach would emphasize how the naturalized positivity of all three identities conceals their inherent negativity and lack, yet, at the same time, underline that the discourse of bipartisanship is ultimately made possible by the routinized concealment of its own contingency, and the contingency of its composite elements. This consequently focuses critical attention on the discursive possibilities that are repressed in mainstream media debates that cannot imagine a politics beyond this given set of identities and the structuring effects of these identifications more generally (thus normalizing scenarios where even modest reformist proposals in health care and other policy areas end up being characterized as extreme "partisan" or "left-wing" measures).

Discourse, hegemony, and antagonism

The fundamental condition of possibility of social objectivity is therefore radical contingency and heterogeneity. Laclau and Mouffe then ask: given such radical contingency, how do formations, identities, and social objectivities develop? Put in more political terms, we might ask: how then can we create the conditions required for a new discursive formation to emerge? What further conditions are needed for social change to occur? This is where the concepts of discourse, hegemony, and antagonism become central, as they show how a "political and precarious *objectification*" of the social can emerge in a constitutive terrain of radical contingency (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 125).

Laclau and Mouffe (2001) argue that identity formation relies upon articulatory practices: that is, the contingent and partial fixation of elements that have no *necessary* identity and relation. The result of this articulatory practice, as we noted earlier, is discourse. Laclau and Mouffe (2001) understand discourse, to extend our initial definition, as a structured

totality resulting from articulatory practice: a system of differential entities constituting and organizing social objectivity out of an infinite field of possibilities (p. 111). This field is described as "the field of discursivity" (p. 112), a constitutive horizon of being from which *particular* discourses are then articulated. Social objectivity is understood as discursive, based on contingent articulations that are nonetheless necessary, because a world without some sense of social objectivity would be the world of the "psychotic" (p. 112). Moreover, it follows that social objectivity is political: that is to say, in formal ontological terms, the political is prior to the social, as the latter is always already politically instituted, and the sedimented inheritance of previous decisions, whose political character is typically concealed. It is important to note, as Thomassen (2005a) observes, how these discursive articulations are contingent rather than arbitrary. Contrary to simplistic stylizations of discourse theory as "voluntaristic," the logic of discourse nonetheless depends upon contextual power relations that render some articulations more likely than others, leaving a multitude of substantive possibilities undeveloped, and a consequent structuring of social relations that advantage some social agents over others.

Laclau's theorization of hegemony, which is absolutely pivotal to his conceptualization of the political, has been given different inflections (Howarth, 2000). The concept has been centrally linked in recent work to his discussion of universality, empty signifiers and affect, such that hegemony is understood in terms of the signifying "operation" and affective investment where a particular identity assumes a "totality or universality" that is, strictly speaking, impossible (Laclau, 2005, pp. 70–1).

Laclau's conceptualization of hegemony as it currently stands can be clarified if we look, in more detail, at how structured totalities – that is, discourses – are constituted. A discourse is more than a system of differential elements, as described earlier. Discourses are constituted by the dialectical, and always contextual, interplay of a logic of difference and logic of equivalence. The logic of difference simply refers to the system of differential elements we already identified as discourse, where elements gain systematicity and meaning through their differences from other elements. By contrast, the logic of equivalence describes the division of the social space along the lines of an antagonistic frontier, such that different heterogeneous elements find a negative commonality, and become linked into a discursive system, against a shared opposition. Put simply, they become "equivalent in their common rejection of the excluded identity" (Laclau, 2005, p. 70). The construction of equivalential relations, which Laclau also describes as a linking of different

political demands, is the basic site of the hegemonic operation.[14] This operation is conceptualized as a form of representation that involves the construction of a "*tendentially* empty signifier."[15] By the latter, Laclau means a signifier that, "without ceasing to be a *particular* difference" (Laclau, 2005, p. 70) within an ensemble of differences, assumes a universality or totality that is the locus of an irresolvable dialectical tension between universality and particularity (Laclau, 2001, pp. 5, 11–12; 1996a, pp. 37–44; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. x). The signifier can be described as "tendentially empty," as it becomes the incarnation of a universalizing logic that transcends, while still bearing the trace of, its particular signifying content. To give the point a very quick illustration, while the universalizing appeal to "peace, land, bread" signified the revolutionary desire for a new kind of social order, peace, land and bread nonetheless retain their status as particular elements within a discursive system. Laclau stresses how this universalizing operation should not be understood in narrow symbolic terms, because identification with the empty signifier necessitates an affective investment of some kind. As he recently observed, "even the constitution of the symbolic as such requires the operation of affect and unconscious. Affect is not something external, added to the symbolic, but an internal component of it." (Laclau cited in Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2010, p. 225) (For more on the role of affect in Laclau's work, and its importance in media contexts, see the chapters by Chang and Glynos, Gilbert, and Simons.)

A more detailed empirical illustration will hopefully capture the key points in a clearer way. Laclau is basically describing situations where a particular demand – for example, the heavily mediatized appeal to "peace" during the Northern Ireland political negotiations of the late 1990s – becomes a universalizing rallying cry for a wider range of social demands. "Peace" becomes more than a particular demand articulated by a particular identity. Its particularity is, in effect, transcended when it becomes the representational and affective focal point of a wider "chain of equivalence": that is, it becomes a tendentially empty signifier where Unionists, Nationalists, Republicans, Loyalists, Catholics, Protestants, Irish citizens, UK citizens, the US government and so on, are articulated as sharing the "same" desire for peace, despite the obvious differences between identities. The symbolic and affective importance of mainstream media practices to the hegemonic construction of the peace process was evident in the ritualistic media appeals to peace – as exemplified by media events such as the May 1998 publication of a joint front-page editorial calling for a "yes" vote on the eve of the Good Friday Agreement referendum by the traditionally nationalist,

The Irish News, and the traditionally unionist, *News Letter* (McLaughlin, 2006); and by the same referendum's image of the political leaders, David Trimble and John Hume, being united on stage by the political celebrity Bono.

The empty signifier "peace" became, in effect, the incarnation of something common to the historically opposed identities, though that commonality should be understood as a shared antagonism to the kind of social order embodied by the different "opponents of peace," rather than a positive identity shared by Unionists and Nationalists. The affective power of media practices again seems particularly important here, for framed in those simplifying terms – as an antagonism between those in favor of peace and those against – who could be against peace? Opposition to the peace process, as a *particular* discursive construction, therefore becomes quite inconceivable and unsayable, especially within the performative constraints of mainstream media practice.

The different identities constituting the Peace Process are modified as a consequence of the hegemonic articulation, though they nonetheless retain their status as particular differences within a discursive system. This means that the hegemonic identity, which was subsequently institutionalized in the Good Friday Agreement, cannot be a fully sutured identity; indeed, if that was the case, we would no longer have the particular identities of Unionists, Nationalists, and so on. Laclau describes the universality incarnated by any hegemonic operation as an "impossible" or "failed" universality, because, in the specific instance, there is an irreconcilable dialectical tension between the universalizing identity of the peace process and the particular identities that constitute it. This tension is irreconcilable because, with heterogeneity as the constitutive condition of identity, there will always be elements that escape articulation in any discourse.

This emphasis on the constitutive role of heterogeneity focuses attention on the different elements of Northern Ireland politics that were not captured within the logic of the Good Friday Agreement – in fact, as if to illustrate Laclau's point about the relative emptiness of hegemonic formations and their vulnerability to dislocation, one critique of the Good Friday Agreement would be to suggest that it institutionalized the sectarian character of Northern Ireland politics, partly by excluding heterogeneous elements like class from the analysis (McLaughlin, 2006). The impossibility of universality nonetheless explains why hegemonic operations are made possible in the first place, because the negativity of identity necessitates the articulation of some kind of precarious positivity that institutionalizes a relatively stable social order. Rather than

viewing this negativity as a reason for pessimism and despair, Laclau sees it as a source of political optimism, because it suggests that whatever "is" the case could always be otherwise.[16] This much was evident in how the institutionalization of the Good Friday Agreement replaced "the troubles" as the normalized imaginary of Northern Ireland politics, eventually forcing its most significant party political opponent, the Democratic Unionist Party, to pragmatically reconcile itself to the new social context. It also focuses attention on how the appeal to peace could potentially have been given a different discursive articulation, let's say in a way that would have constituted a more fundamental challenge to the sectarian character of Northern Ireland politics, or interrogated the neoliberalized assumptions structuring the idea of a "normal" Northern Ireland.

Sedimentation, dislocation, and the discourse of neoliberal capitalism

To illustrate the importance of the categories of dislocation and sedimentation to discourse theory, as well as to further explore the implication of heterogeneity and other concepts already introduced, we will ground this section in a discussion of the discourse of neoliberal capitalism. We have chosen this example not only because neoliberal capitalism is still, despite recent speculation about its dissolution, the most hegemonic discourse in existence today, with all kinds of constituting effects on how people and institutions see the world and communicate within it, but also because Laclau, and by implication discourse theory, has been accused of not being able to effectively theorize capitalism and political economy (see Žižek, 2000).

Neoliberal discourse provides, according to its own internal logic, a seemingly coherent explanation for not only economic relations, but for human relations in general, marginalizing and obscuring those aspects of social life and material reproduction that are inconsistent with its own totalizing assumptions (Harvey, 2005). Hegemonic articulation typically takes place via the linkage of, amongst other terms, "private property," "free markets," "individualism," "consumerism," "economic growth," "progress" and "innovation," around the empty signifier of "capitalist freedom", or the empty signifier that resonates most effectively with the particular social context in question; as Harvey and others have emphasized, there are "different neoliberalisms" which are constituted from the culturally specific articulation of a common range of elements (for further discussion of neoliberalism, see the chapters by Gilbert and Phelan). This system of differences is institutionalized and universalized in a variety of

"sedimented" discursive forms. Laclau (1990) appropriated the concept of sedimentation from Husserl to describe the routinized social practices that "forget" and "conceal" the ultimately contingent nature of the social order (p. 34). These sedimented discursive forms include particular capitalist production and distribution systems, commodity exchange values and associated mechanisms, investment products, monetary rules, property rights, trade agreements, labor relations, audit regimes, and workplace codes. Moreover, neoliberal assumptions are institutionalized in a range of media and cultural practices such as advertising, business reporting, lifestyle and property supplements, and, as Gilbert discusses in Chapter 5, reality television formats. This articulation of a chain of equivalence is given a totalizing coherence through the construction of an antagonistic discursive frontier, where "socialism," or "social democracy," is articulated as the empty signifier of the identity rejected by neoliberals. Consider, for example, the emergence of the Tea Party movement as part of an anti-Obama frontier in US politics. Here the importance of the affective dimension to the articulation of political identities becomes especially clear, as different policies and decisions of the Obama regime (health care reform, and bailouts of the car industry and the banking sector) coalesce under the empty signifier of a fantasmatic "socialism," which is seen as threatening the integrity of, and in the process helping to give coherence to, an American/capitalist identity.

However, following Derrida, the outside to any identity involves more than a simple Othering relation (where the identity of the neoliberal capitalist is constituted by their not being a socialist), because, as we have already discussed, Laclau also talks of a "radical outside" that escapes articulation. In the particular Tea Party example, this radical outside or heterogeneity can be described as those elements – that is, discursive possibilities – that cannot be clearly articulated within the world constructed by the Tea Party discourse.

This heterogeneous element might, for instance, include radical environmental or anarchist perspectives that cannot be located within, and would also reject, the reduction of the political field to an antagonism between capitalist and (so-called) socialist prescriptions. And it might also include the repression of moderate reformist measures that are immediately branded as "socialist." This example indicates that while heterogeneity is described as that which escapes articulation within a particular discursive context, it is still possible to explicitly identify heterogeneous elements; indeed, Laclau illustrates this point in his discussion of how the heterogeneous category of the "lumpenproletariat" functioned in traditional Marxist analysis.[17] The key point we want to

emphasize here is that these heterogenous elements cannot be routinely articulated *within* a particular discursive structure – or, a fortiori, a corporate media system – because, if they were, the logic of the discourse, as a regulating device, would be rendered incoherent and lose its legitimacy. This is what Laclau means when he suggests that heterogeneity makes any discourse simultaneously impossible and possible. A discourse is impossible because heterogeneity indicates the absent "something" that always escapes it; an excess that always threatens to expose its structural precariousness. Yet identity is nonetheless made possible by the constitutive condition of heterogeneity: by escaping articulation, heterogeneous elements are not named within the discursive context; the discourse thus *seems to* represent all; it *seems to* be full.

We see the concept of heterogeneity, and the associated discourse theoretical vocabulary of discourse, antagonism and so on, as particularly important in a critical media politics context. It focuses attention not only on the absences and exclusions within a particular discursive context, or the gaps and silences in the representation of a particular issue, but also highlights those surplus elements that, if politically mobilized, could be the basis of a new discursive articulation – or, if you like, an alternative positivity. The concept of constitutive heterogeneity also suggests useful ways of critically understanding the proliferation of media spaces in the new digital environment (for a more detailed discussion, see the chapter by Fenton). For example, it tempers any easy, technologically deterministic celebration of the empowering and democratizing effects of the digital media environment, as if an abundance of new media spaces is inherently significant in political terms. Instead, it would emphasize the need to give the heterogeneous elements an articulatory form which challenges existing power relations – as exemplified, for instance, by the role of social media networks in helping to construct an antagonistic discursive frontier against authoritarian political regimes in the 2011 North African revolutions. Laclau's articulation of hegemony as the central category of politics and political organization can certainly be interrogated for what Bratich, in this volume, suggests is Laclau's tendency to ignore forms of politics that do not comply with his own theoretical assumptions. However, it should hopefully be clear that contrary to some fantasmatic perceptions of post-structuralist identities, which one-dimensionally cast post-structuralists and post-Marxists as celebratory of a world of particular identities and indifferent to existing power relations (for further discussion, see Finlayson, 2001), discourse theory fosters a methodological disposition that critically interrogates the material conditions and facticity of the hegemonized social order.

This volume wants to challenge any residual perception of discourse theory as opposed to materialist, and in particular political economy, approaches in media studies (for further discussion, see Berglez, 2006), or fixated with narrow questions of "identity politics," by emphasizing how interrogating the material, institutional and, indeed, class configurations of the hegemonized centre, which we have named here as neoliberal capitalism, is absolutely central to the critical project of a radically materialist discourse theory (see further discussion in Chapter 2).

The constitutive condition of heterogeneity, and the associated impossibility of discursive closure, provides the condition of possibility for articulatory practices and, as such, provides for any disarticulation or rearticulation that might facilitate a political challenge to the hegemonic order. Heterogeneity means that discourses always remain open and unstable, and vulnerable to those elements that escape articulation (Howarth, 2000, pp. 103–4). Clearly, a discursive understanding of neoliberal capitalism enables us to explore how its authority can be challenged. Yet discourse theory does not assume that a challenge to neoliberal capitalism can simply be willed. Articulations are contextually affected and contingent, not arbitrary, and thus more likely in some forms and instances rather than others. Two contingent factors are particularly significant in shaping the discursive context. First, discursive articulation "takes place in an already partly sedimented terrain permeated by relations of power" (p. 295). Elements that constitute a discourse will be partly determined by their sedimented meanings, so, as a consequence, some rearticulations become more likely than others (for further discussion of sedimentation, see Chapter 6; and Glynos & Howarth, 2007). For example, within the horizon of a neoliberalized media regime, personalized and individualistic news stories become more pragmatically viable than more "structural forms" of storytelling (see the chapter by Chang and Glynos).

Second, hegemonic systems are disrupted, and the possibility of discursive rearticulation is heightened, when radical contingency is illuminated by dislocatory events – that is, "out-of-the-ordinary" and unexpected events "that cannot be symbolized by an existent discursive order, and thus function to disrupt that order" (Howarth, 2000, p. 111). Such events might include sudden ecological changes or catastrophes, financial meltdowns, or spectacular and seemingly "irrational" acts that can lead to a crisis within a particular social context. The crisis in the existing social order may open up the possibility of new discursive articulations (see further discussion of dislocations in Chapter 2), though Laclau stresses that dislocations have no predetermined causal effects,

and the emergence of an alternative social order remains contingent on the mobilization – and, of course, the media traction and visibility – of a hegemonic formation in opposition to the established order. Here we can think of how the contingency and precariousness of neoliberal capitalist discourse was exposed by the various "financial crises" of 2008 onwards, to such an extent that some commentators proclaimed its end. However, it is clear that the dislocatory rupture in neoliberalism has not seen a collapse in symbolic and psychic identification with neoliberal prescriptions. Indeed, if anything, the current political preoccupation with a "deficit crisis" in many countries points to a retrenchment of the state that is entirely in keeping with a doctrinaire neoliberalism.

Ideology: Two distinct forms

We believe that dislocation is an especially productive concept in a media politics context, particularly because of how social crises, and what Giddens calls our sense of "ontological security" (cited in Scannell 2007, p. 158), are now so heavily dependent on mediated and mediatized processes (Cottle, 2009). It also begs questions about the spectacle-driven nature of dislocations, and even about the capacity of powerful media organizations to engineer, or cover up, moments of dislocation. This points to a set of concerns already familiar to critical media and communication researchers through the concept of ideology. In moments of dislocation, the possibility for discursive rearticulation leading to significant social change may be ideologically suppressed (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). Here ideology involves the concealment – perhaps unconsciously – of the radical contingency of social practice (Laclau, 1990, p. 92; 1996b). This goes against the notion that discourse theory dispenses with ideology (Cloud, 1994). But it also suggests a fundamentally different conception of ideology from a more orthodox Marxist conception, which equates ideology with a superstructural phenomenon that masks real economic relations of exploitation. While the desire to conceptualize ideology in a way that interrogated a simplistic economic determinism thesis was also clearly evident in the work of media studies pioneers like Hall (1986b) (for further discussion, see Scannell, 2007), the specificity of the discourse theoretical understanding of ideology is worth considering further.

Glynos (2008) suggests that discourse theory "appeals to a conception of ideology which gives the notion of misrecognition an ontological rather than an epistemological value, thereby avoiding the usual pitfalls associated with appeals to 'false consciousness'" (p. 286). Laclau (1990) distances himself from the traditional Marxist account in the following

terms: "the ideological would not consist of the misrecognition of a positive essence [i.e. the false consciousness thesis], but exactly the opposite: it would consist of the non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any ultimate suture" (p. 92). Ideology therefore no longer exists simply as the epistemological distortion of a consciousness that would otherwise be true; mainstream media can no longer be simply positioned as a space of falsity. Rather, it occurs when identities are misrecognized as fully positive, rather than understood as constitutively precarious and incomplete. Ideology is present when a particular discursive system, such as neoliberalism, is seen as "all there is," its hegemonic logic having become so naturalized and sedimented that the political – in other words, the contestable – conditions of its initial discursive constitution are no longer socially recognized (Norval, 2000, p. 328). The concept takes on an ontological import when ideological misrecognition is equated with the failure to recognize how the very constitution of the social takes place in a horizon of radical contingency. We can see how this closing and naturalization works in relation to the discourse of neoliberal capitalism, which, with the support of a state and mainstream media infrastructure, has been able to sustain its hegemony and ideological coherence by continually rearticulating and reinventing itself. This ability to incorporate new elements (for example, the institutionalization of carbon markets), absorb dislocatory threats (such as bank bailouts), and pacify different political activisms (for instance, anti-debt coalitions) has the effect of naturalizing and embodying a belief that the context in which the social is (re)constituted will *always* be a capitalist one because human beings *are* narrowly self-interested, thus pointing to a banal, affect-imbued labour of naturalization in which media practices, rituals, and spectacles play a particularly crucial role.

There are two distinct ways in which such ideological naturalization can be seen to take place in discourse theoretical terms. The most explicit and perhaps most potent ideological strategy is the drawing of antagonistic frontiers that clearly demarcate an "us" from a "them" (the "enemy"), where equivalential logics become emphasized over differential ones through the "dichotomization of social space" around two opposed chains of equivalence (Laclau, 2005; Thomassen, 2005a). Antagonism therefore becomes necessary to both the hegemonic construction of equivalential relations and the act of ideological closure. Such boundary-drawing acts as a discursive attempt to name and expel the antagonistic Other(s) blocking the possibility of a full identity, so as to establish the mythical coherence of the positively asserted identity

(for more on the psychoanalytical dynamics of antagonism, see the chapter by Chang and Glynos). In the process, heterogeneity and radical contingency, the constitutive limits of identity, are obscured. Again, the different "financial crises" of 2008 onwards suggests a useful example, where at times the enemy was named as a particular "corrupt" executive or financial institution, or as "big government," such that the failures of the system at large were obscured by individualized moral blaming. Fox News' constitutive need for a "liberal media" Other, to give coherence to its own identity, offers another clear illustration. We can even suggest that while Fox's articulation of a "fair and balanced" identity is routinely mocked by knowing media audiences, its most significant ideological effect has been in naturalizing an assumption that its mainstream media and political antagonists *are* the embodiment of a left-wing identity.

Ideology can also take place via a countervailing emphasis on, and extension of, relations of difference, rather than equivalences, to the point that we seem to be left with a single space of equally recognized differences without an explicit enemy. Each particularity recognizes itself as just another particularity in a closed system of differences, without recognizing the uneven structural power relations and associated exclusions (Laclau, 1996a, p. 27). Think, for instance, of the sentimental media reporting of a traumatic event, which in trying to give voice to different individual perspectives on the event ends up actually depicting a "unified community," which is supported by clichéd slogans like "we are all in this together" and "at times like these we stick together," and so on. This unification through difference conceals both the hierarchical power relations within the community and the heterogenous elements that must be excluded to make the discourse of unity possible. This ideological operation is clearly one that neoliberal capitalist discourse thrives on given its emphasis on individual freedom and difference. It is also one that mass media practices replicate when they over-focus on individuals' strategies, choices, successes, failures, lifestyles and cultures, without serious in-depth questioning of the capitalist system in which these individualistic dispositions are naturalized. However, Laclau would argue that even within a context marked by the seeming extension of difference over equivalence, the particular differences have a shared relation to one another through a tendentially empty signifier (such as "individual freedom") that is opposed to various Othered identities. Thus, while difference may be privileged in such cases, an antagonistic dimension is still maintained, if backgrounded. The free individual consumer of neoliberal capitalism is understood against various embodiments of un-freedom, be it "Islam," "socialism," "the immigrant," "the banker,"

or whatever particular enemy is seen as threatening the stability of the contextually articulated identity.

In the process of this boundary-drawing that obscures the excess of identity, "exclusions of people, positions, opinions, worldviews and so on and so forth" are made that "have real consequences" (Thomassen, 2005b, p. 112). As we see in the different financial crises, real people lose their houses, their lives shattered. And yet, as the conceptual name for the "closing operation" of identity, Laclau suggests that "ideology is a dimension which belongs to the structure of all possible experience," a process where discursive excess/lack is obscured so as to establish a sense of objective identity (Laclau, 1996b, p. 213). So, as against the kind of negative connotations typically associated with the concept – and which have been characterized as the dead-end of a critical media studies (see Corner, 1998; Scannell, 2007) – ideology can also be a redemptive aspect of social life in that it facilitates some stabilization of identity and enhancement of everyday life experiences.[18] Nonetheless, even if stripped of its more pejorative connotations,[19] ideology for some discourse theorists (see Glynos & Howarth, 2007) still seems to involve a clear concealment of a truth about human relations – the truth of radical contingency – that casts doubt on the value of Laclau's desire to make an absolute break with the classic Marxist emphasis on false consciousness and epistemological distortion (for further critique of Laclau along these lines, see Cooke, 2006). This opens up questions about the relationship between ideology and ethico-normative critique that remain underexplored by Laclau, partly due to his insistence, against the interpretation of Critchley (2004) and others, that his ontology of radical contingency has no inherent ethical import (see Laclau, 2004). However, other post-Marxist discourse theorists have elaborated on the relationship between ideology and ethical-normative critique in productive ways. For example, Glynos and Howarth (2007) suggest a useful distinction between an ideological and ethical "mode of identification" with the radical contingency of social relations, where the former drives to conceal and close down what the latter wants to keep visible and open. The question of discourse theory and (ideology) critique is also explored in Chapter 2 of this volume. But now we want to turn from critique to the democratic role of the media, a central concern for both critical media politics and Laclau and Mouffe's project of envisioning a progressive politics.

Radical democracy and populism

How then does discourse theory understand democracy and the democratic role of media? Discourse theorists promote *radical* democracy.

Radical here indicates two basic things. First, an ongoing commitment to the expansion of "liberty" and "equality" into ever wider areas of the "social" so as to give "political voice to the underdog" (Laclau, 2004, p. 295; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 2000). And, second, that democracy is based on radical contingency, which means that the commitment to liberty and equality cannot be rationally founded, but is instead historically instituted and hegemonically articulated and defended.

Radical contingency is experienced as an "unresolvable tension" between equality (community without hierarchy or distinction) and liberty (respect for distinction and difference), which reflects our earlier observations about the irreconcilable dialectical tension between universalizing equivalences and particular differences (Laclau, 2001; Mouffe, 2000). Mouffe, who has written more extensively on radical democracy, refers to this tension as the "democratic paradox." Put another way, this unresolvable tension is the expression of radical contingency and undecidability. Keeping this radical tension, or "undecidable game" (Laclau, 2001), in play is seen as constitutive of radical democracy, since rendering the gap explicitly visible – as against ideological masking – allows for the possibility of excluded voices being heard through new discursive articulations. In other words, consistent with the logic of radical contingency, a "radical" democratic politics involves a type of hegemonic politics that, in order to remain always open to excluded identities and elements, institutionalizes its own contingency, thus encouraging perennial contestation of the sedimented social order: "The moment of tension, of openings which gives the social its essentially incomplete and precarious character, is what every project for radical democracy should set out to institutionalize" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 190). (See Chapter 2 for a discussion of how this account of radical democracy may provide for a radical public sphere conception, in contradistinction from Habermas'.)

Laclau has recently extended and modified his understanding of hegemonic logics and radical democracy with reference to "populism" (Laclau, 2005; see also Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, pp. 132–4, 137), which was also a central concern of his work in the 1970s (Laclau, 1977). Wishing to liberate the concept from its typically pejorative connotations, populism is associated with a form of politics where logics of equivalence dominate (in aligned opposition to a particular institutional regime), while democracy is associated with the political institutionalization of a normative order dominated by logics of difference. The category of the demand, ambiguously understood as both a "request" and a "claim," plays a particularly important role in this analysis (Laclau, 2005, p. 73).

A populist or popular demand is equated with "the very logic of the political," understood as the articulation of a chain of different demands against the social order, while a "democratic demand" is described as one that "remains isolated" from other demands (Laclau, 2005, p. 125). The notion of a democratic demand is distinguished from "anything related to a democratic *regime*" (Laclau, 2005, p. 125); in fact, Laclau even makes the rather counter-intuitive observation that a "fascist regime can absorb and articulate democratic demands as much as a liberal one" (p. 125) (for a critique of Laclau's position, see Norval, 2007). We will not discuss this theoretical account of populism further here, as this thematic is explored in more detail in the chapters by Simons and by Chang and Glynos. However, it is worth noting Laclau's increased focus on affect and rhetoric in *On Populist Reason*, two theoretical categories that have only briefly been noted in this overview and which, as different contributors note, are particularly important in a media politics context.

Thematic focus of this book

This collection explores one overriding question: how does post-Marxist discourse theory, as a critical political theory, relate to the concerns of what we call a critical media politics? While this introduction's primary focus has been on giving a detailed overview of discourse theory, with only brief illustrations from media practice, subsequent chapters give in-depth considerations of the relationship between discourse theory and critical media politics. Our contributors approach the book's problematic from various perspectives, all of which recognize the value of a reciprocal critical engagement between discourse theory and other theoretical approaches to critical media politics. Despite their distinct and sometimes conflicting assessments of discourse theory, a number of key themes feature across the contributions: including the relationship between media practices and political practices, the relationship between discourse and materiality, the relationship between institutional and extra-institutional practices, the relationship between discourse and affect, the relationship between the media and mediality, the relevance of discourse theory to new social movements, protest politics and digital media, and how discourse theory may conceive of the public sphere, materiality, and radical democracy. While emphasizing the scope of the book, it must also be noted that the constraints of the project mean that we have had to leave aside a number of important concerns, which we would encourage others to explore in relation to critical media politics. For example, neither

the relationship between discourse theory and critical realism, nor the often antagonistic disputes between Laclau and Žižek (see, for example, Žižek, 2006), are the specific focus of any of the chapters that follow.

In Chapter 2, Lincoln Dahlberg extends the general theoretical discussion of the introduction into an examination of five significant and under-explored questions in discourse theory, which have particular relevance to critical media politics. Dahlberg begins by considering how discourse theory might be considered to be "critical." This leads to the exploration of the possibility of a discourse theoretical public sphere and the relationship between discourse and materiality, which in turn leads to the possibility of a discourse theoretical political economy. Dahlberg concludes by questioning hegemony as *the* form of politics. The question of a radically democratic public sphere is also considered in Chapter 3 by Oliver Marchart, whose contribution emphasizes the importance of ontological level theorizing to Laclau's work. Marchart asserts a particularly productive distinction between "mediality" as the ontological condition of media practices, and "the media" as an empirical or ontic level horizon, arguing that "mediality constitutes the specific perspective under which the political can be integrated into media theory and theories of communication."

In Chapter 4, Jeremy Gilbert deploys the question "what does radical democracy feel like?" as the starting point for a discussion that critically assesses the capacity of discourse theory to account for the material and sensuous specificity of media forms. His initial discussion of issues in semiotic theory is developed through various empirical illustrations – as, for example, when Gilbert shows how an attention to the affective, as opposed to the narrowly ideological, dimension of televisual discourse is crucial to understanding role of reality television programmes, like the *The X Factor,* in reproducing neoliberalism. The affective dimension of media discourse is also explored in Chapter 5 by Wei-yuan Chang and Jason Glynos, who, in recognition of Laclau's increasing theoretical debt to Lacan, consider how a psychoanalytically inflected discourse theory can be used to illuminate the "ideological and political significance of emotive language in the popular press." Organized around a case study analysis of the 2009 UK "MP's expenses" crisis, Chang and Glynos show how the narrative explanations of the crisis that gained most traction in the media coverage were typically structured by two distinct fantasies of "the self-sufficient subject" and the "caring state," both of which concealed the possibility of a "radical democratic subjectivity" where "responsibility for our fate is situated at the level of *ourselves* as a *collective and democratic subject.*"

In Chapter 6, Sean Phelan explores how discourse theory might be usefully articulated with Bourdieu's field theory, grounding his analysis in a discussion of the methodological problematic of neoliberalization and media democracy. Phelan considers the benefits of supplementing discourse theory with the more sociological orientation of field theory, suggesting that a combination of the two facilitates a more sophisticated contextual analysis of how sedimented social and media practices might be understood and disrupted. A similar comparative theoretical approach structures Chapter 7, where Jack Zeljko Bratich critically evaluates a discourse theory perspective on critical media politics against the autonomist Marxist tradition of Negri and others. Although he recognizes the analytical productivity of discourse theory concepts, Bratich criticizes (extending Dahlberg's discussion) Laclau's privileging of the concept of hegemony as *the* universal framework for understanding politics, suggesting that it ultimately renders the quite distinct account of politics formulated by autonomists invisible within a discourse theory framework.

The relationship between discourse theory and autonomist, as well as Deleuzian, accounts of media political practice is also explored in Chapter 8 by Natalie Fenton. Focusing on the Internet practices of the so-called new social movements, she emphasizes the value of an analytical perspective that recognizes the "multiplicity" and "difference" of the digital media environment, while nonetheless arguing that discourse theory's focus on the possibility of radicalizing a more traditional political architecture provides a necessary counter-balance to the autonomist tendency to bypass the question of state power. The ability of discourse theory to satisfactorily explain the historical emergence, or failure, of particular political movements, and the constitutive role of media practices therein, is examined by Jon Simons in Chapter 9. Focusing specifically on Laclau's (2005) work on populism, Simons suggests that, despite the value of Laclau's approach, his "formalist" theory of populism is "sorely in need of media theory in its accounts of the discursive construction of the people," and a Deleuzian perspective on "affect" that is more attentive to the role of media and popular culture practices in its "social dispersal."

Peter Dahlgren concludes the book with a chapter that goes beyond the specific discourse theory focus of the other contributions, and resituates the book's rationale in terms of a more open-ended reflection on the possibilities of a critical media politics. Emphasizing his relative distance from the discourse theory tradition, and mindful of the perspective of a more general media and communication studies reader,

Dahlgren engages in an exercise of "estrangement reduction" by identifying general points of commonality and difference between discourse theory and a wider range of theoretical approaches. After briefly considering the other chapters, Dahlgren ends by imagining different possible scenarios in terms of the future articulation of the relationship between discourse theory and critical media politics.

Notes

1. Many thanks to Peter Berglez, Thomas Owen, and Lasse Thomassen for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.
2. Indicative texts about "media discourse" include Bell & Garret (1998), Fairclough (1995), Matheson (2005), and Machin and van Leeuwen (2007).
3. One obvious case is the absence, when writing (November, 2010), of *any* reference to Laclau in the US-based journal, *Political Communication*. Contrast this with the 24 citations of Habermas.
4. Our use of the term media politics should also be distinguished from its use by political communication scholars like Iyengar and McGrady (2007) who focus primarily on elite political actors and dynamics.
5. In his debate with the critical realist, Roy Bhaskar, Laclau describes discourse as the "basic grammar within which possible objects are constituted and that this mediates any kind of contact with reality" (Laclau & Bhaskar, 1998, p. 9).
6. One obvious exception here, at least from a Laclau-centric perspective, would be Žižek's extensive analysis of film and popular culture.
7. Howarth, Norval and Stavrakakis (2000) distinguish a discourse theoretical conception of discourse from Hall's by suggesting that the latter maintains an "ontological separation between different types of social practice, whether understood as ideological, sociological, economic, or political" (p. 4).
8. For two other recent examples of how discourse theory can be applied in media and communication studies, see Mylonas (2009) and Uldam (2010).
9. Glynos and Howarth (2007) summarize the ontic/ontological distinction as follows: "In *Being and Time* Heidegger argues that an ontical inquiry focuses on particular types of objects and entities that are located within a particular domain or 'region' of phenomena, whereas an ontological inquiry concerns the categorical preconditions for such objects and their investigation" (p. 108). While the ontic/ontological distinction is central to Laclau's work, it is important to underline the fluid relationship between these conceptually distinct levels of social inquiry, and how the formulation of social ontologies is ultimately a response to empirical – that is, ontic level – developments. See, for example, Laclau's (2004) discussion about the transformation of psychoanalysis from a "regional (ontic)" field of "scientific inquiry" into an ontological account of how social objectivity is constituted (p. 315).
10. For a genealogy of the conceptual difference between politics and the political, see Marchart (2005, 2007).
11. The "quasi" of quasi-transcendental indicates two things: first, following Marchart (2007), "that grounds and abyss, conditions of possibility and

conditions of impossibility, are inseparably interwoven;" and second, "that all transcendental conditions will always emerge out of particular *empirico-historical* conjunctures" (p. 25; also see Glynos & Howarth, 2007, pp. 154, 163). This "quasi" status indexes the ontological condition of "radical contingency," which is different from all other transcendental signifieds as it is self-undermining, and hence transcendental in a qualified sense only.

12. It is worth noting Laclau's (2004) affirmative response to Stäheli's (2004) argument that discourse theory needs to conceive of limit and radical exclusion in ways that go beyond the category of antagonism. Although the category of heterogeneity isn't explicitly cited by Laclau in his response, he does note: "[t]he way I see matters at the moment is that the limits of a discursive formation are not homogenous but are constituted by the unstable articulation of the three dimensions I have described above [dislocation, antagonism, and "a kind of radical non-representability" equated with heterogeneity] and the moving of one into the other" (Laclau, 2004, p. 319). This theoretical development begs critical questions about the constitutive role of antagonisms in the emergence of hegemonic formations that cannot be explored here. For a more detailed discussion of the tensions in Laclau's account of antagonism, see Thomassen (2005a) and Stäheli (2004).
13. The dialectic here is, as Laclau and Mouffe (2001, p. xii) observe, a "specific dialectic." In Jameson's (2009) terms, this is one of "many dialectics" that we can detect operating in different theoretical approaches, even in ones that are anti-dialectical. Laclau and Mouffe (along with Jameson) explicitly reject what Jameson calls "*The* Dialectic," the singular and total philosophical system that can be found in dialectical materialism or particular readings of Hegel, where there is a single self-unfolding teleological movement towards a resolution – the ultimate return of difference into the one (Laclau, 1990, p. 26; 2000, pp. 60–4; Laclau & Bhaskar, 1998, p. 11; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, pp. xi, xiii).
14. It is worth noting the increasing importance of the discipline of rhetoric to Laclau's analysis of the "form" of this signifying operation. He treats Jakobson's identification of metaphor and metonymy as the "foundational tropes" of rhetoric as homologous to the central distinction in discourse theory between equivalence (the "metaphoric moment") and difference (metonymy) (Glynos & Stravakakis, 2010, pp. 235–6).
15. The empty signifier is also described as a "nodal point" (Laclau, 2006, p. 43), a term that was more prominent in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.
16. Laclau's identification with the Lacanian concept of lack, and its view of the social as inherently negative, has sometimes been opposed to the concept of excess, which is typically glossed in terms of a Deleuzian emphasis on the positivity of the social (Porter, 2006). Laclau rejects this dichotomizing of terms (2005b), describing " 'lack' and 'excess' as two necessary moments of a unique ontological condition . . . It is because there is lack, conceived as deficient being, that excess becomes possible" (p. 256). We follow Thomassen (2005b) here in referring to excess and lack simultaneously through the appropriation of Laclau's (2005a) use of the term heterogeneity, which for Laclau is analagous to the Lacanian Real.
17. Laclau (2005a) describes Marx's category of "lumpenproletariat" as heterogeneous and excessive because, as the signifier of the "non-productive" forms

of human productive relations, it cannot be conceptually mastered within the capitalist–proletariat dialectic of traditional Marxist analysis.

18. Glynos and Howarth (2007) note how this recognition of ideology as socially necessary is also present in the work of Althusser (p. 117).
19. Laclau (2006b) suggests, in a characteristically provocative fashion, that ideology is simply the name of the "closing operation" and "has not the slightest pejorative connotation" (p. 114).

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2

Discourse Theory *as* Critical Media Politics? Five Questions[1]

Lincoln Dahlberg

Introduction

Discourse theory is, at its core, a theory of politics: of the hegemonic formation of social relations – of discourses – that necessarily involve hierarchies of power and relations of inclusion and exclusion. As such, discourse is, in essence, political. And since discursive articulations and contestations rely on forms of mediation, ranging from body language to mass media representations, discourse theory can be thought of as fundamentally about media politics. Moreover, given its commitment to an examination of the discursive configurations of power constituting social relations, and its identification of practical strategies for changing such configurations, discourse theory can be understood as offering an approach to the critique of media politics, and indeed an approach to doing critical media politics.

This book examines how discourse theory stacks up as such an approach. In this chapter I draw attention to some significant and under-explored issues in discourse theory that are particularly relevant to undertaking critical media politics. In doing so, I will cover considerable ground and work at a largely theoretical level. The chapters that follow will draw on more substantive media politics examples and address particular issues in greater depth. Peter Dahlgren's concluding chapter, in particular, focuses on the potential application of discourse theory to the practice of critical media politics. The issues that I examine are framed by the following five questions: Given radical contingency, how can discourse theory be "critical"? Can we have a post-Marxist discourse theoretical public sphere, and what would it look like? What is the relationship between discourse and materiality, and what does such mean in relation to critical media politics? Can we conceive of a discourse theoretical political economy,

and what would this involve with respect to media politics? Does discourse theory lead to an hegemony of hegemony, and should (and can) we think beyond hegemony, particularly with regards to contemporary media politics practices?

These questions have arisen from my engagement with discourse theory from a critical media-sociology background. The particularity of my interests and approach will no doubt be clear from the issues raised, the direction taken, and the interpretations offered. However, I believe that these five questions have far-reaching consequences for the development of the relationship between discourse theory and critical media politics. While I do suggest solutions and propose ways forward, I do not purport to (fully) answer these questions here. The central aim is to bring to the fore, and invite consideration of, some under-examined but central issues to discourse theory as critical media politics.

Discourse theory as critical?

Any critical theory must offer both a basis for critique of the particularity of existing social conditions and be reflexive about the contingency of its own claims. Discourse theory can be understood to be critical in both these senses. In the second sense, following from its own self-understanding as a theoretical discourse, it must necessarily see itself as hegemonic, exclusionary and lacking, as based on the particular situated social conditions of its emergence, and hence open to the possibility of being contested by that which it has excluded and repressed. This radically contingent status has not often been explicitly highlighted by discourse theorists (for one exception see Glynos & Howarth, 2007). I will come back to the question of discourse theory, drawing attention to its own limits in the last section of this chapter. In this section I want to explore the first sense of critical theory named above, that is, the provision of the means by which to critique existing social conditions. The question here is: on what basis can discourse theory support critique, and what does critique consist of, given radical contingency and thus the impossibility of any universal normative foundation, particularly in relation to media politics? I suggest the answer is, in fact, that critique arises from out of radical contingency.

Given that radical contingency is accorded quasi-transcendental status (see Chapter 1), discourse theory cannot provide positive normative grounds and criteria for the critique and guidance of media practices – grounds and criteria that many media theorists and researchers desire (hence the popularity of Habermas' communicative rationality). For

discourse theory, any critique must be *radically* situated. This means that critique is not only always already from somewhere, from a particular location and political-ethical standpoint, and affected by this, but that it is lacking, never able to claim to come from a point of absolute truth or right. As such, radical contingency is the condition of *impossibility* of critique. However, radical contingency also provides – and is the condition of *possibility* of – the (universal) basis for critique. The impossibility of closure means that any social system is an incomplete and politically (hegemonically) instituted structure, open to the possibility of contestation by that which it has excluded and repressed.

Critique then involves highlighting and explaining, using hegemonic logics (as outlined in Chapter 1), the occluded power relations, closures, and exclusions that accompany social systematicity. This critique can be complemented by contrasting a particular situation with idealized (yet impossible) normative principles, following the logic of the empty signifier, where a particular signifier (for example, full employment, equality, liberty, security, and so on) comes to temporarily and precariously represent a universal (yet unattainable) norm, the effect being to highlight the lack or failure within those systems defining the particular situation (Devenney, 2004, p. 132; Laclau, 2000, p. 84; 2004, pp. 286–7). This approach is in line with the normative critique of other critical theory approaches, particularly those for which any norm posited is not a universal rational foundation but *stands in* for such.

Such critique, against some positionings of discourse theory, is in fact suggestive of early Frankfurt School critical theory (for example, Horkheimer, 1974). By positing being as never fully given, as radically undecidable, discourse theory parallels early Frankfurt School thinking in asking us to examine the conditions upon which given identities, meanings, practices, and institutions have become possible, and what relations of power sustain them and thus the current social order. Discourse theory thus opens a space for thinking and doing otherwise. It allows for, indeed encourages, the questioning of ultimate ends, in contrast to technocratic, instrumental questioning that focuses on the means to achieve an assumed fixed end, a given social system. In other words, discourse theory offers an ideology critique, where ideology, as discussed in Chapter 1, involves the obscuring of radical contingency. Ideology critique here involves the "critique of the naturalization of meaning" and of the "essentialization of the social," of the "non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any ultimate suture" (Laclau, 1990, p. 92).

Here we can also recognize the radical dialectic, as encountered in Chapter 1, operating between openness and closure, critique and ideology,

and so on. In order to critique any ideological closure, one must sustain a commitment to, and thus a closure around, radical contingency or openness, not simply as the quasi-transcendental condition of possibility of all being, but as normative (a commitment that Glynos and Howarth (2007), amongst others, refer to as ethical).[2] There is not the space here to explore the inconclusive debate *within* discourse theory about whether discourse theory's explication of political logics necessarily prescribes a norm or ethic of openness (see Critchley, 2004; Devenney, 2004; Laclau, 1996, pp. 77–8; 2004). However, it is clear that a minimum *implication* of discourse theory for critique is a commitment to openness or radical contingency. Given this commitment, in undertaking an ideology critique of closure it is necessary to strategically perform a specific ideological closure around the norm of openness.

The praxis of critique can also be understood as, in a minimal sense, doing radical democracy (see Chapter 1), of bringing attention to the conditionality of any social system (including democracy) and thus encouraging the recognition of excluded "voices" (Laclau, 2001; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001).[3] From this we can conclude that the critical and (radical) democratic role of communications media, and hence the basis for a democratic evaluation of the media, involves encouraging and enacting the continual contestation of (ideological) closure, highlighting how power is maintained and voices excluded, and putting forward alternatives. The institutionalization of critique, and democracy, through media-communication systems is discussed in much critical media studies literature via the concept of the public sphere. I want to now turn to this concept and, extending this discussion of critique, ask what a post-Marxist discourse theoretical (or radical) public sphere might look like?

A post-Marxist discourse theoretical *radical* public sphere?

The public sphere conception has been central to theorizing the democratic role of the media. And, despite agreeing with critiques of more rationalist (Habermasian) understandings of the conception (see Mouffe, 2000), Laclau and Mouffe have both deployed the concept, accepting its importance for conceptualizing (radical) democratic politics, so long as it is thought of as a pluralist and conflict ridden political space that values multiplicity and struggle, rather than as a space of rational consensus (see, Laclau, 1996, pp. 120–1; Laclau et al., 1999; Mouffe, 2005a, 2005b, 2007; Mouffe et al., 1999).[4] Laclau and Mouffe do not go beyond this vague "agonistic" understanding. Nor have they theorized the role of communications media in such politics. However, from their theory

of radical contingency, hegemony, and democracy, we can flesh out a radical democratic public sphere conception. I will begin to do this here through a contrast with the Habermasian (1989, 1996, 2006) version that is currently dominant in critical media theorizing and research.

I want to start by noting that discourse theory and Habermas *agree* that dissensus *and* consensus, or openness *and* closure, as well as some form of democratic interaction, are central to a conception of the public sphere. The public sphere for discourse theory, developing on Laclau and Mouffe's allusions, comes into being wherever a breakdown of social consensus arises (or an antagonization, as Marchart says in Chapter 3 of this book), and where democratic means of engaging with others over the contested social norms are adopted, even if these means are always already circumscribed by hegemonic logics. Habermas similarly sees the public sphere emerging as a democratic – specifically deliberative – response to breakdowns in social consensus. At the same time, closure is seen as the motivation for particular hegemonic rearticulations in discourse theory and consensus the motivation for particular deliberations in Habermas. Yet here we also see the significant difference between Habermasian theory and discourse theory with respect to the constitution of the public sphere: the former emphasizes rational deliberation whereas the latter expects agonistic contestation and hegemonic articulations. These differences flow from a fundamental ontological difference between Habermasian theory and discourse theory. I will now examine these differences in more detail in order to explore where discourse theory leads us in relation to the public sphere.

For Habermas (1996, 2006), breakdowns in normative consensus are necessary for the constitution of the public sphere in that they are the starting point of debate. However, "below" these breakdowns – presupposed within every ("post-traditional") communicative act – can be found a "deeper" normative consensus over the means toward the democratic resolution of disputes, a universal rational form of interaction: "communicative rationality." As such, communicative rationality is, for Habermas, the basis of public sphere deliberation and of the restoration of consensus, as well as the basis for judging empirical "distortions" within particular deliberations. A public sphere in which rational (democratic) consensus can be fully achieved is thus seen as possible, if not probable, given "distortions" in everyday practice.

For discourse theory, by contrast, dislocation is ontological – that is, the universal condition of being. This means the impossibility of finding any universal rational basis for the resolution of breakdowns in normative consensus. But this condition of impossibility for the public sphere,

as a rational communicative space, also becomes the public sphere's condition of possibility as a space of agonistic democratic contestation and hegemonic rearticulation of norms (also see Marchart, 2002). Dislocation enables and ensures the public sphere, because discursive systems (that is, "space")[5] can never be fully closed and so there is always the possibility for democratic contestation of norms, although sometimes such a possibility is ideologically obscured. Thus, for discourse theory, the emergence of the public sphere from breakdowns of consensus, as well as subsequent failures to realize fully rational democratic communication, is a (democratic) expression of the radically contingent or dislocated character of the social – in other words, the public sphere emerges from "reactivations," which involve "rediscovering, through the emergence of new antagonisms, the contingent (hegemonic) nature of so-called 'objectivity'" (Laclau, 1990, p. 34).

So the public sphere is conceived, in discourse theory terms, as a democratic response to breakdowns in normative consensus, breakdowns that express a fundamental dislocation (that is, radical contingency). But what then, for discourse theory, would this democratic response actually entail? This question is prompted by the desire to guide and evaluate democratic media practice. And yet it is impossible to answer in formulaic terms, as is more easily the case with Habermasian theory, given that for discourse theory any communication that takes place is radically contingent, rather than based on rational communicative foundations. That is, any consensus on the form and agenda of public sphere interaction – what is included and excluded, the closures and boundaries indicated by "sphere" or "space" – is radically contingent and thus only ever hegemonically achieved.

At the same time, not anything goes. The public sphere, even when based on radical contingency, is conceived as a *democratic* response to dislocation. As such, it brings with it certain sedimented normative values, providing tendential indications of the form of engagement needed for the constitution of a (radical) public sphere. For a start, while rational deliberation is not possible, Mouffe (2000, 2005a, 2005b) argues that a commitment to democracy means that some form of democratic procedures are necessary so as to regulate confrontations and transform antagonism, and (the threat of) violence, into agonistic confrontation – that is, into a "legitimate" democratic space – and thus transform antagonists into adversaries who recognize each other's "rights" to passionately defend their positions. However, these procedures are themselves, unlike the Habermasian rationally founded ones, decided through hegemonic struggle (Mouffe, 2005a, 2005b).

Agonistic exchange, including any deliberative practice, is thus a tendentially empty signifier (only tendentially empty as it comes with sedimented – although initially hegemonized – meanings that differentiate any conceptualization of agonistic exchange from, for instance, violent confrontation). As well as democratic procedures, Laclau and Mouffe, as noted in Chapter 1, see "liberty" and "equality" as "shared ethico-political principles" inextricably tied to radical democracy, and thus the radical public sphere. Moreover, Mouffe (2000, 2005b, 2007) sees these principles as helping to transform antagonistic confrontation (and violence) into agonistic struggle. And yet, once again, they are tendentially empty signifiers that are hegemonically established, which nonetheless come with certain core meanings associated with the democratic tradition, meanings that cannot be disposed of lightly.

Thus, to summarize, what we can now say is that a radical (discourse theoretical) public sphere is constituted through agonistic confrontations regulated by democratic procedures along with the ethico-political principles of liberty and equality – procedures and principles drawing from the core meaning of democracy and yet still specified, and applied, through hegemonically achieved consent.

Most significant here in determining the particular agonistic debate that takes place is the hegemonic boundary drawing – indicated by "sphere" or "space" – around both the "legitimate" form (procedures and principles) and contents (allowable agenda) of public sphere communication. While boundaries are necessarily open, given radical contingency, they become (seemingly) closed through hegemonic practice, and such closure is obscured through ideological naturalization. However, given a commitment to a radical democratic public sphere, ongoing contestations of such closure must be made possible so as to not simply highlight radical contingency but to enable the possibility of excluded voices being heard. How can this ongoing contestation be effected?

Through the logics of hegemony, as outlined in Chapter 1, discourse theory provides an understanding of how hegemonic boundary drawing – inclusion and exclusion – is realized. Moreover, given that any hegemonic consensus is radically contingent, discourse theory points to the possibility of the counter-hegemonic (democratic or not) contestation, and subsequent dislocation and rearticulation, of such boundaries by excluded ("illegitimate") elements. But this is all very abstract. How can we interpret it more practically, particularly in relation to communication media? In other words, what media politics is available that can support the ongoing contestation of "legitimate" public sphere boundaries? What we need is an outline of the type of media politics that will

enable voices associated with any excluded elements to form counter-hegemonic projects and effectively contest the boundaries of hegemonic publics, including what is deemed at any time to be their legitimate form and contents. Here, we may at first think of Mouffe's work since she has focused, more than Laclau, on the practicalities of radical democracy and the public space. However, her suggestions remain very general and vague.[6] The most she offers for the guidance of counter-hegemonic politics, apart from an important emphasis on passion and the formation of collective identities via articulation (the importance of which is noted again below), is the general unspecified thought that art, social movements, political parties and – of particular importance to this volume – the mass media, can all play a counter-hegemonic role (Mouffe, 2005a, 2005b, 2007; Mouffe et al., 2006). As for digital media, it has been simply equated with supporting interest group enclave politics and digital voting (Mouffe et al., 2006, p. 6).

I understand that, given their adherence to radical contingency, Mouffe and Laclau may be reticent to specify forms of practical politics appropriate to radical democracy, including those that would make for effective counter-hegemonic activisms and rearticulations. Still, I believe that we can explore and outline various possibilities for such politics, with specific focus on media practices, while staying true to radical contingency. I suggest that one way in which an outline of the media politics involved in the contestation of the boundaries of "legitimate" public spheres can be more practically formulated is by turning to developments in post-Habermasian critical theory, particularly the "counter-publics" theorizing of Nancy Fraser, which has in many ways pre-empted the idea of a post-Marxist discourse theoretical (radical) public sphere. Fraser's (1998, 2007) work can be understood as post-Habermasian, and largely in line with discourse theory, since she has drawn upon both Gramsci and post-structuralist theory (via, in particular, Michel Foucault) to rethink the Habermasian public sphere as a space *necessarily* constituted by exclusion, and associated antagonism, due to the impossibility of final closure or full rationality. This ontology of radical contingency allows her public sphere theorizing to be articulated with discourse theory. Fraser argues that for counter-discursive contestation of the boundaries of the "mainstream" or "dominant" public sphere, we need multiple and vibrant counter-publics: alternative discursive arenas supported by various mediums, standing in opposition to mainstream publics and yet still constituted by democratic interactions (in contrast to the discourse of many "interest groups"), from out of which counter-discourse can form, giving voice to excluded elements. This counter-publics theorizing has

been effectively applied in media politics research, particularly studies of alternative media and digital media networks (see, for example, Dahlgren, 2007; Downey & Fenton, 2003; Kahn &Kellner, 2007; Palczewski, 2001; Salazar, 2003; Wimmer, 2008. Also see the contributions in this volume by Bratich, Fenton, and Marchart).

What then does Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist discourse theory contribute, if anything, to theorizing the contestation of "legitimate" public sphere boundaries, given that an emphasis on necessary failure, exclusion, antagonism, and counter-publics/discursive contestation have already been theorized from out of the post-Habermasian counter-publics tradition represented by Fraser?[7] I see the key contribution of Laclau and Mouffe here to be their theorizing of hegemony, and specifically of the logic of equivalence; the articulation of particularities around a tendentially empty signifier that comes to represent a common identity, which is strengthened by the naming of a common enemy (as outlined in Chapter 1), enables the examination of the way in which boundaries form around a particular debate (in form and content) and suggests how political identities can develop from out of often quite diverse and heterogeneous counter-publics and associated counter-discourses, and form counter-hegemonic fronts that can more effectively challenge ideologically sedimented forms of political/democratic engagement. This is no small contribution as it provides strategic logic(s) for the understanding of, and practical realization and extension of, the radical public sphere formalization.

It is clear here that media politics is important in both the maintenance and contestation of publics, whether hegemonic or counter-hegemonic. Of particular interest today with regards to counter-hegemonic articulations are (global) digital communication media. For examples of the articulation of counter-publics supported by digital communication networks, we need look no further than the global justice movement (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Ylä-Anttila, 2005) and the global anti-war movement (Kahn & Kellner, 2007). What is needed is further exploration of these networks in relation to articulations and counter-hegemonic practice. There is no space here to further discuss the radical discursive politics of such digital counter-publics. However, in latter chapters of this book Fenton and Marchart advance the theorizing of (digital) media politics with respect to a discourse theoretical public sphere, in particular considering counter-hegemonic media practices. What I will now examine is the relationship of this discursive understanding of media politics to the material relations that are so central to Marxist and other critical political economy traditions.

Discourse and "mere" materiality?

For Laclau and Mouffe, social objectivity, including media technology, is discursively constituted. This claim has led (mostly) Marxist critics to charge Laclau and Mouffe with "idealism" (see, for instance, Geras, 1987; and Veltmeyer, 2000). In response, Laclau and Mouffe (1990, pp. 106–11) have argued strongly that their post-Marxist discourse theory is very much anti-idealist. They define "the essence of idealism" as the reduction of the "thing" to "thought," or "the real" to the "concept," as the positing of "a world of fixed forms constituting the *ultimate* reality of the object" (pp. 108–10). They also see this understanding of idealism – the one often deployed by their critics – as compatible with a "classical" materialism that affirms "the thing's *existence* outside thought," given that the "thing" here is still fully thought (p. 110). In contrast to such idealism, they posit a radical materialism in which conceptuality, and thus all objective form, is essentially fractured and lacking, unable to fully grasp reality, to fully reduce reality to rationality, such that there is always something un-knowable that escapes rationality (Laclau, 1990, p. 185; Laclau & Bhaskar, 1998, p. 9; Laclau & Mouffe, 1990, pp. 106–11; 2001). They argue that this is the type of materialism that Marx works toward in his more "radical relational" tendencies, where capitalism is understood as an always incomplete relation between different elements: between the state, means of production, relations of production, ideas, and so on (Laclau & Mouffe, 1990, pp. 110–11). Such radical relationality produces meaning through the articulation of material practices (or "acts"), as against conceptuality (rationality) grasping materiality, and reality (Laclau & Bhaskar, 1998, p. 13; also see Marchart's chapter here).

Thus, on the one hand, there is no "extra discursive" to being because being is discursively constituted, "not in the sense of constituted in the mind of men, but in the sense that any kind of practice is embedded in the elaboration of the linguistic [discursive] world" (Laclau cited in Laclau & Bhaskar, 1998, p. 13). But, on the other hand, Laclau and Mouffe do not deny that a "mere materiality" or "material substratum" exists beyond human practice and discourse, which shows itself in the failure of conceptual determination (Laclau & Bhaskar, 1998, p. 14; Laclau & Mouffe, 1990). Laclau and Mouffe (1990) are very clear that discourse theory does not deny the "mere referential materiality" of objects, an "object's mere 'existence,' in the 'it' beyond all predication," the "naked existence" of "things" or "entities," as opposed to the existential being constituted in discourse (pp. 100–10). The "mere" here distinguishes the

materiality of "things" [in] themselves, from the materiality of human (discursive) being. Discursive relations (contingently) constitute a meaningful world, including what is understood as materiality, but do not constitutive "mere existence." For example, the movements of people defined within international migration law as "refugees" take place within discursive systems that determine migration pathways, national immigration policy, international refugee obligations, and ultimate destinations. However, even if such identity and actions are discursively constituted, the "raw" affect of the hunger or fear driving individuals to uproot themselves is not. Discourse does not constitute nor fully grasp life *in itself*.

Yet I believe that Geras and others, despite naive misunderstandings or explicit misrepresentations of discourse theory, have been partly motivated by at least two intuitions that should be explored further. First, despite Laclau and Mouffe's explicit anti-idealism, the bracketing of "mere materiality," together with the use of transcendental logic (see Chapter 1), is suggestive of a Kantian transcendental idealism that distinguishes knowledge from unknowable "things in themselves." Roy Bhaskar raises this possibility in discussion with Laclau, questioning the extent that Laclau's discourse theory heads in a Kantian dualistic direction: "I think in a way there is a tendency within Ernesto to want to say that we constitute a phenomenal world in our discourses, but of course we're not denying that outside those discourses there is something to which they can ultimately be referred" (Laclau & Bhaskar, 1998, p. 12).[8]

However, this equation of Laclau with Kant should not be made so quickly. For a start, Laclau and Mouffe's focus in their transcendental questioning is different from that of Kant: discourse theory follows Heidegger in moving transcendental questioning from a focus on epistemology to a focus on ontology. Instead of asking what the necessary conditions of subjectivity must be in order for knowledge to be possible, the question becomes: "What are the necessary conditions of being (discourse) for the current situation to be the case?" In relation to this, Laclau, in his discussion with Bhaskar, explicitly refers to his position as transcendental realism as opposed to (Kantian) transcendental idealism (Laclau & Bhaskar, 1998, p. 10). We have already seen how Laclau's case for such realism (or radical materialism) is based on discourse theory's ontology of necessary failure of positive conceptuality. But what of "mere materiality" outside representation? Does this not take the form of a Kantian *thing-in-itself*? Mere materiality is indeed a *radical* outside, in the sense that it stands for that which can never be known. As such, it acts for discourse theory, as constitutive: the naming of an unknowable

"mere materiality" enables the conceptualization of discourse theory. But, as well as "representing" the unknowable, the radical outsideness of "mere materiality" also points to the failure of conceptuality previously referred to, which makes discourse theory a form of realism or radical materialism. That is, the radical outside of mere materiality suggests a lack *within* all discourse: the failure of discourse to ever get to grips with, and fully represent, "reality" (Laclau, 1990, p. 79).[9] Rather than Kantian, Laclau and Mouffe embrace the failure and fracturing of the conceptual field and thus of the Kantian "unity of apperception, of the 'I' that accompanies all my representations" (Laclau & Bhaskar, 1998, p. 9).

The discourse theoretical radical dialectic, as described in Chapter 1 of this book, crops up again here in the relation between "being" (discourse) and "not-being" (mere materiality).[10] As well as "mere materiality" constituting discourse, we can think of the reverse. The concept "mere materiality" is meaningless without the concept "discourse." The "it" of "mere materiality" is defined against discourse, as the outside of discourse, and thus only makes any sense (comes into being) *after* discourse is defined, once we understand social reality as discursive (Devenney, 2006).

Moreover, this "not-being" is *more than* a logically necessary outside (necessarily constitutive and dislocating). It also affects discourse in substantive ways. We should not equate and thus reduce mere materiality to the failure of discourse,[11] even if it points to such failure, as just suggested. No doubt, as soon as we try to identity the content of mere materiality we have already subsumed "it" within discourse. But we also *need to*, and *can*, speak of the *effects* of "mere materiality" on discourse, beyond its role as a radical outside. This brings us to the second "intuition" that I see as motivating critics. Discourse theory, while acknowledging "mere materiality," does not fully appreciate or acknowledge the limits and affects it has on discourse. Take, for instance, one of the key places where Laclau and Mouffe explain discourse in relation to materiality, their reply to Geras' critique (Laclau & Mouffe, 1990). Here, Laclau and Mouffe talk about football to highlight the discursivity of all "being," as opposed to "mere material existence" (pp. 100–1). They refer to the discourse of "football" as a "system of socially constructed rules" that "socially constructs" an object as a "football." But they neglect to mention how the social being of a particular object as a "football" also depends upon the "mere referential materiality" of the object in question. For instance, what we call a "tree" or "pond" cannot be a "football." We cannot simply constitute things in any way we please – this would be "bad" social constructionism. The very sedimentation

of the meaning of objects, their objectification in discourse, is affected in various ways (that we can never fully grasp) by something inherent to the "thingness" of those objects, which differs from object to object. Only an object with a certain mere materiality can be what "we" refer to as a "football," or for that matter "the Internet," "television," "radio," and so on.

Extra-discursive "material" substance affects discourse, just as discourse affects, in substantive ways, mere materiality. As such, even if mere materiality "represents" what escapes discourse, discourse theory must not shy away from speaking of "its" affects. How do we actually do this? Discourse theory does not offer us much guidance, and clearly more work is needed. Here I will simply make some suggestions with respect to media. In relation to such, we must not only speak of how discourses constitute media-communication systems (design, development, uses, attributed values, and so on), but of how there is an unrepresentable "mere materiality" of media-communication technologies that limits or impacts upon discourse (for example, that which determines the possible sounds/images that can be (re)produced and distributed). With respect specifically to this book, Oliver Marchart's chapter is suggestive of how we might engage in media analysis focused on the "material dimension of discourse." We can also turn to critical traditions outside discourse theory in order to find resources (including a grammar) to speak more *explicitly* about the effects of the material dimension of media politics. For example, we can draw on the language of media technology "affordances" (see Gibson, 1977; Norman, 1999). This indicates the complementarity of the materiality of technology and the human subject, and refers to the specific ways in which a technology, and here specifically media technology, encourages and enables particular uses and outcomes, enabling users to perform certain activities. Discourse theory should also further explore the resources available in critical realism, which is particularly drawn upon by critical discourse analysis and critical political economy approaches (for beginnings, see Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Laclau & Bhaskar, 1998). Moreover, Deleuzian radical materialism, despite Laclau and Mouffe's antipathy toward this tradition, may also prove helpful. This direction is taken in Chapter 4 of this collection, where Jeremy Gilbert deploys, amongst other things, Deleuzian theory to help reflect upon how we can recognize the role of affect with respect to discourse theoretically informed radical democratic politics. I will say more about the need to explore the articulation of discourse theory with other critical theories at the end of this chapter. Next I will examine a question very much related

to discourse theories' radical materialism, and how such could be more practically incorporated into discourse theory. This is the question of discourse theory's relationship to political economy analysis, including that of the media.

Radical political economy?

From a post-Marxist discourse theory perspective, given our previous discussion, the "economy" is just as discursive, and no more material, than any other sphere of society. As Laclau (1990) says:

> For us, "discourse" is not a topographical concept, but the horizon of the constitution of any object. Economic activity is, consequently, as discursive as political or aesthetic ideas. To produce an object, for instance, is to establish a system of relations between raw materials, tools, etc, which is not simply given by the mere existential materiality of the intervening elements. (p. 185)

This discursive understanding of economic activity, beyond the more philosophical problematic discussed in the previous section of the role of "mere existential materiality" in limiting or effecting the discursive constitution of objectivity, raises the question of how practically adequate discourse theory is for an analysis of "the economic." In other words, what sort of political economy may be effected by discourse theory? The concern here is that the (constitutive) centrality of discourse and the political, and the priority it is accorded over the social/economic, together with the lack of any significant discourse theory analysis of political economy since Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) extensive discussion of hegemony with respect to modern capitalism, suggests that discourse theory has not only abandoned economic (and class) analysis but has done so necessarily.[12] Such a reading would mean that discourse theory is impotent in relation to an analysis of current global capitalism, and that it plays into the cultural side of the cultural politics/political economy dualism that has plagued media and cultural studies.[13] My argument here is that this need not, and should not, be the case.

It need not be the case since discourse theory can be understood as advancing a "radical" form of political economy analysis – radical in the sense of understanding the constitution of the economy as based upon necessary contingency. The economy here is that sphere of life associated with the hegemonic institutionalization (sedimentation) of discursive systems associated with what is *understood to be* the material

production and re-production of life, through which a multitude of uneven power relations are maintained and contested. This radical understanding supports a *critical* political economy, in the sense of "critical" discussed at the start of this chapter: since all systems are seen as contingent, any particular economic system that becomes naturalized without an alternative – such as capitalism has largely become – is understood as ideological and thus calls for an ideology critique of its hegemonic claims and realization. A radical political economy then asks, what are the conditions of possibility of such a system (that is, what are the political and social logics that have enabled it to achieve and maintain hegemony?), and what is included and excluded as a result. As such, this radical understanding goes beyond a culture/political economy divide.

Moreover, discourse theory *should not* abandon a political economy analysis. In particular, a radical political economy critique of global capitalism, and the media-communication systems supporting it, is very much needed to support critical analysis of how global exploitation is taking place and how counter-hegemonic contestation may be possible. Capitalism is clearly the most successful discursive system in operation today at both nation-state and global levels. Most striking is capitalism's ability to deal with contingency. As Žižek (2006) argues, capitalism works ideologically by embracing and encouraging the plurality of discourses and identity politics in "postmodern" society that liberal politicians, theorists, and media outlets celebrate as liberating. Laclau and Mouffe agree. They refer to "the dislocating rhythm" of capitalism that brings attention to the contingency of (other) taken-for-granted social systems, which works ideologically by suggesting both capitalism's democratic impulse – of opening space for the expression of previously obscured interests – and its naturalness (Laclau, 1990, p. 4; Laclau & Mouffe, 1990, p. 119). Capitalism now *seems* to be – in contrast to Žižek's (2006) suggestion that it *is* – an otherworldly system, seemingly impervious to discursive challenge.

Given this capitalist hegemony, and its clearly detrimental effects (from immiseration to environmental devastation), discourse theorists need to urgently prioritize the critical analysis of the current system, including of the ways in which media-communication technologies are supporting its hegemony, so as to bring to the fore obscured alternatives. Moreover, post-Marxist hegemony theory can be deployed to consider how to counter capitalist hegemony. While there is clearly much resignation in the face of global capital, which has led Žižek (1989, pp. 28–30) to theorize the advance of "cynical reason," this is not, nor can it be, total. One only needs to look at the extensive counter-capitalist activity that can be witnessed taking place daily on a global level, including through

new and old media communication systems (for further discussion, see Chapter 8 by Fenton). Moreover, as Laclau asserts,

> the economic level of society is not a self-contained entity operating as an infrastructure; . . . the coherence it reaches is, as with everything else, hegemonically constructed; . . . [and as such, the] capitalist relations of production are the locus of a multiplicity of antagonisms and democratic demands, so that [the conceptualization of] an expansive radical democratic hegemony obviously needs to be extended to the economic sphere. (Laclau cited in Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2010, p. 242)

Through its categories of equivalence, empty signifiers, dislocation, and so forth, as set out in Chapter 1, discourse theory provides a powerful means by which to understand counter-hegemonic economic formations, the extension of democracy to economic relations, and capitalism's rearticulations in the face of such threats (as we have already seen in Chapter 1, where capitalism was drawn on to illustrate the hegemonic logics described in discourse theory).

In relation specifically to critical media politics, discourse theory provides a contribution to critical political economy, rather than being an *enemy* of such, as would be the case if it was positioned on the culture side of a political economy/culture divide. A discourse theoretical radical political economy provides a means by which to understand how media practices not only contribute to the hegemonic understanding of the economy and the advancement of capitalism, but also support the contestations of such hegemony. Moreover, a radical political economy can show how media practices are themselves resourced, legitimated, and institutionally organized through hegemonic conceptualizations of their role in society and the economy: we can think, for example, of the legitimation and institutionalization of private media systems in contrast to public service media, or community media. Discourse theory emphasizes the political nature of such, and encourages counter-hegemonic contestation and thus the radical democratization of media systems.

The hegemony of hegemony?

I want to conclude this exploratory chapter by considering the discourse theoretical claim that hegemony is *the* form in which (media) politics takes place. For Laclau and Mouffe, the hegemonic logic of the empty signifier not only describes the "true" form of politics (see Chapter 1 of this volume; Laclau, 2001), but more than this, hegemony is also the

basis of critique (see above), democracy (see Chapter 1), the public sphere (see above), ethics (Laclau, 2004) and even science (Laclau & Bhaskar, 1998). Indeed, since society is understood to be politically instituted – the social being the sedimentation of earlier political decisions – then society, in total, is understood to be ultimately based on hegemonic logics. As such, discourse theory reads like a totalizing system in which there is no alternative politics, or social ordering for that matter, to the logic of hegemony. This reading has been picked up by a range of critics of discourse theory who, while largely accepting the (radical) contingency of the social, do not accept that the only form of politics that follows is hegemony, particularly given today's complex communications environment (Arditi, 2007; Beasley-Murray, 2003, 2010; Day, 2004; Kioupkiolis, 2010; Robinson & Tormey, 2007; Thoburn, 2007; Valentine, 2001; also see Bratich in this collection).

However, Laclau and Mouffe's understanding is somewhat more complex than it first appears. Since radical contingency is the presupposition of hegemony, the question is if hegemony is the necessary result of radical contingency – and hence the logic of hegemony is, like radical contingency, universal (if also self-undermining) – or whether radical contingency means hegemony is very much a particular historical form?[14] Laclau and Mouffe do at times, particularly in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, posit hegemony as just *one* form of politics that becomes prominent at a certain (modern) historical moment and associated with particular social-political developments (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, pp. 138–55). Hegemony here is referred to as "a form of politics," as "a type" of politics and not *the* ahistorical form of politics as suggested elsewhere. As such, its dominance could end at any moment. Some theorists believe that this moment is now. They see alternative political forms coming to prominence, supported by new media-communication systems. These theorists offer a range of alternative forms of politics "after" hegemony, while still maintaining radical contingency as fundamental. Valentine (2001), for instance, draws on Foucault, Wolin, and Rancière to posit a non-hegemonic approach to politics. Barnett (2004) calls for more recognition of relations beyond the hegemonic logics of difference and equivalence, quoting Coles that "what slips from view in this [hegemonic] approach is any possibility of imagining ways of "being-with-others as others: striving to engage with their otherness" (Coles, cited in Barnett, 2004, p. 511). Kioupkiolis (2010) argues that:

> the essentialist leanings of the hegemonic approach can partly be ascribed to its failure to reckon with the praxis dimension of creative

> agency, which takes centre stage in the alternative views of democracy propounded by Hannah Arendt, Giles Deleuze, Cornelius Castoriadis, John Halloway and, of course, Michael Hardt and Toni Negri. These conceptions evince a keener sense of social openness as they remain alert to the possibility of the radically new. (p. 146)

"Post-hegemony" theorists, such as Beasley-Murray (2003, 2010), Day (2004), and Thoburn (2007), draw on Deleuzian and Autonomist Marxist theory to argue for the existence of politics "beyond" hegemony (also see Bratich's chapter in this collection). Day (2004) speaks of "non-representative," "anarchistic," or "rhizomic" politics that "consciously defy the logic of hegemony," seen now in the "newest" social movements (especially the "anti-globalization" movement) combined with digital activism (pp. 731–2).[15] Of central importance here is the movement from discourse to affect, and from hegemony to "biopolitics" (Beasley-Murray, 2003, 2010). Thoburn (2007, p. 84) points to a range of research showing affect as "a key dimension of experience in information- and image-based capitalist cultures, and one that most clearly marks the movement of cultural [and media] studies away from a conception of culture [& politics] as signifying practice." The current limits of discourse theory to deal with affect in relation to media are explored further by Gilbert and Simons in this book. More work is needed to clarify whether current conditions, including those of media politics, are leading to a new post-hegemonic stage of politics. What seems clear, however, is that the logic of hegemony is under strain as a universal logic of politics in general and of media politics in particular.

While unclear about the status of hegemonic logics as historical or ahistorical, Laclau and Mouffe do speak of theory in general, as contingent upon practice: "Any substantial change in the ontic content of a field of research leads also to a new ontological paradigm" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. x). As Laclau (1990) states:

> for us, the only thing that is absolute is the present, not theory. This means that theory will become contaminated, deformed and eventually destroyed by a reality that transcends it. But it is precisely in this destruction that all thought finds its most dignified form, or, if you like, meets its "destiny." . . . and its only through a multitude of concrete studies that we will be able to move towards an increasingly sophisticated theory. (pp. 205 & 235)

This suggests, when applied to discourse theory, not only the possible surpassing of hegemonic logics depending on historical developments,

as Marxism was surpassed by "the problems of a globalised and information ruled society" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. x), but the eventual "destruction" of discourse theory, as its "destiny."

This logic, of the necessary dependence of discourse theory on the study of concrete practice, can in fact be found in the method by which Laclau and Mouffe derive hegemonic logics. As outlined in Chapter 1, the ontological categories of hegemony are understood as deriving from the quasi-transcendental examination of the conditions of possibility of observed hegemonic/political practice, the "quasi-" indicating the reliance (contingency) of the ontological hegemonic logics upon empirical/ontic practices (see Glynos & Howarth, 2007, pp. 154, 163; Marchart, 2007, pp. 25, 127). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, for example, proceeds with a genealogy of modern politics and a deconstruction of Marxist political theory. However, here and in much of Laclau and Mouffe's (and other discourse theorists) work, past and present seem to be read through theoretical logics, and not the other way around. The result is tautological – practices are read as hegemonically structured *before* their hegemonic conditions of existence are identified (for a seemingly explicit acknowledgement of this tautology, see Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. x).

This brings us back to the claim at the start of this chapter that discourse theory, if it is to be consistent, must be critical (or radical) in the sense of necessarily understanding itself as discursive and essentially lacking, open to contestation and development in relation to socio-political conditions. This self-understanding needs to be made explicit. Discourse theory, as Kioupkiolis (2010, p. 138) suggests, "should become more fully informed by a reflexive awareness of its own contestability and should gain a firmer foothold in political praxis," rather than simply applying pre-defined hegemonic categories.[16] And as has been suggested by Anna Marie Smith (1998, p. 25), herself a product of the "Essex School," discourse theory must be worked out in relation to practice, or it will lead to an authoritarianism. Moreover, this working out should explore how discourse theory can draw resources from and articulate with, and in the process be modified by, other political and cultural theory. Glynos and Howarth (2007) provide some directions on how this may be possible without either "subsumption" or "eclecticism." Various chapters in this current book contribute to such a task, discourse theory being articulated with, or supplemented by, field theory (Phelan), autonomist Marxism (Bratich), cultural studies/mediology (Simons), Althusserian apparatus theory and "Birmingham School" cultural studies (Marchart), and (counter-) publics theory (Marchart, and also my discussion above). Jeremy Gilbert's chapter is of particular interest to the post-hegemony critiques noted above, as he poses the possibility of an articulation between post-Marxist hegemony

theory and Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of "assemblages" that would limit hegemony to particular types of society. Indeed, it is central to the aim of this book to explore the "contestability" of discourse theory, as a critical theory, in relation to media politics – to examine the extent of its applicability, its limits, and various possibilities of fruitful articulation with other theoretical approaches. I now leave it to the following chapters to take up this task.

Notes

1. Much thanks to Sean Phelan for his helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.
2. Glynos and Howarth (2007) explicitly distinguish between ethical critique and normative critique, as does Laclau. There is no space in this chapter to explore this distinction in discourse theory.
3. I use "voice" here to indicate the agentic aspect of discourse. In other words, I use it to indicate that, in association with discourses, there are subjects (enunciators), although their agency (voice) is circumscribed by their particular discursive location – their particular position in relation to systems of power, inclusion and exclusion, advantage and disadvantage.
4. Discourse theory's pluralism is distinguished from standard liberal pluralism in that it sees the latter as failing to take into account sedimented systems of power and ideology, including those upon which any pluralist system is based. As such, discourse theory believes that it is imperative to re-politicize the economy (Laclau, 2000).
5. Mouffe says that she prefers to use "space" rather than "sphere" so as to differentiate her position from Habermas' (Mouffe, et al., 2006). Laclau (1990), in turn, uses "space" to refer to closure and sedimentation (pp. 68–9). I refer to both "space" and "sphere" to indicate, in Laclau's sense, the closure or boundary drawing that takes place around any particular "public," where "public" refers to openness, exposure, and contestation. As such, public and space (or sphere) are antinomic. The public sphere thus indicates a constant tension between openness and closure that reflects the discourse theoretical radical dialectic referred to in Chapter 1.
6. Given the resources that she herself provides, Mouffe surprisingly fails to theorise the contestation of "legitimate" agonistic public sphere boundaries. See Norval (2007) for further discussion of this limitation in Mouffe's work (pp. 158–9).
7. More recently Fraser (2007) has theorized transnational public spheres, while Mouffe (2005b) has been working on the idea of an "agonistic multipolar world." Unfortunately there is no space here to explore how this work extends the radical public sphere theory that I have started to develop in this chapter.
8. For another argument linking Laclau to Kant, see Žižek (2000).
9. "Mere materiality" does not equate with, and yet points to, the (Lacanian) "Real," in the sense of an ultimate lack or failure of discursivity.
10. For discourse theory, "discourse" replaces "being" in Heidegger.

11. We should not reduce mere materiality to something in the order of the Lacanian Real, although it points in that direction.
12. A few initial attempts to link discourse theory and media political economy can be found in Carpentier and Spinoy (2008).
13. For critiques of discourse theory's ability to undertake a critical political economy, from different Marxist traditions, see Geras (1988) and Žižek (2000). For an overview of the culture/political economy bifurcation in communication studies, see Peck (2006).
14. "Radical contingency" in discourse theory is ahistorical. And yet, as seen in Chapter 1, it is also quasi-transcendental (in that it is self-undermining).
15. Laclau and Mouffe strongly disagree with Hardt and Negri's imminentism (see Laclau 2005, pp. 239–50; Mouffe, 2005b, pp. 107–18).
16. In their writings, Laclau and Mouffe do not often position discourse theory as itself discursive and constituted by discursive logics. However, in at least one place Laclau (1996) refers to his argument as discursive: "I am engaging in a power struggle for which there is a name: hegemony" (p. 22).

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3

From Media to Mediality: Mediatic (Counter-)Apparatuses and the Concept of the Political in Communication Studies[1]

Oliver Marchart

Media and mediality

For every student of social protest it should be evident that there is a *politics of the media* which is not entirely absorbed in *media politics* (or *media policy*). Social movements tend to integrate a huge variety of mediatic practices in their actions, practices that do not necessarily aim at simply "getting into the media" (that is, the "mass media"). These alternative media, or radical media (Downing, 2001), serve vital functions in the construction of a movement's identity and self-image. By providing a movement with internal communication structures, they contribute to the constitution and stabilization of an alternative public sphere largely autonomous from the public sphere of the mass media. At the same time, the very practices involved in the production of alternative media (from the editing of a website to the handicraft work necessary in the preparation of street protest) contribute to the subjectivation of the participants as subjects of protest and, hence, to the stabilization of the protest movement's identity. If this is the case, though, a series of conceptual clarifications will be in order as both communication sciences and social movement studies, being mainly focused on the mass media and based on pretty outdated communication models, will not provide us with theoretical tools that would contribute to an in-depth understanding of the role and function of protest media.[2] It is therefore advisable to revise our very notions of protest politics and subjectivation, of "publicness" and mediality. In the following I propose, from the perspective of the "Essex School" of discourse theory (Howarth, Norval & Stavrakakis, 2000), to enlarge our notion of "the media" in at least two directions: on the one side, concerning the cultural-political

function of particular media, on the other, concerning the general political dimension of mediality:

1 In the first sense of such an enlarged notion of media, protest media have to be understood as facilitators for the construction of a movement's identity on the terrain of cultural-political practices. Their function may vary, and it is helpful to at least differentiate between *alternative media* (working parallel to the mass media), by which we can understand media aiming at the establishment of alternative networks for debate, self-organization, and the provision of information (an example would be the international *Indymedia* network), and *counter media* which do address mass media, the general public, and the institutional field of politics with the counter-hegemonic demands of the movement. To the extent that both forms of protest media together constitute an *integral moment* of a given movement or movement network, they not only transmit information, but help in stabilizing the political and counter-cultural identity of the movement. A whole variety of media practices can be implicated in this function that usually go unnoticed by a communication sciences approach. Those practices can only be observed when shifting, in James Carey's terms, our standard "transmission view of communication" to a "ritual view of communication" (Carey, 1992). To study the "ritualized" forms by which protest identity is established via mediatic practices, we would have to turn not only to the Internet, but also to seemingly more traditional protest media such as journals, pamphlets, leaflets, posters, puppets, costumes, or less traditional computer games. What Sarah Thornton (1996, p. 6) in her study of club cultures called "micro media" – flyers, telephonic info lines, text messaging, mailing lists, and today one would add social network platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and so forth – play an indispensible function in organizing a particular scene, be it political or subcultural, or both. Through their organizing function, and the "ritual" practices surrounding them, these media provide a given movement with a vital infrastructure. It is therefore possible to analyze today's protest movements as subcultures or ensembles of subcultures without necessarily culturalizing their political identity. Nevertheless, in doing so, it is important – at least from an "Essex" viewpoint – to analyze protest media not as isolated phenomena but as the mediatic apparatus with the aid of which, in the last instance, a counter-hegemonic formation might be organized on the terrain of culture (that is, the terrain of signifying practices). What I propose is to trace back, in a Gramscian

understanding, the function of alternative and counter media in organizing practices that are articulated into a greater – yet in no way homogeneous – counter-hegemonic apparatus. Such an apparatus or politico-mediatic dispositive of a social movement, by connecting the different moments of the movement and providing them with an institutional framework, may be understood as the actual "medium" of a given movement. For this reason, it serves a function similar to the one of Gramsci's (collective) "organic intellectual."[3]

2 In the second sense, our concept of the media has to be refashioned, on a more theoretical, if not philosophical plane, with regard to the political function of *mediality*, and the general conditions of the emergence of a public sphere. While it is certainly necessary to include in every analysis of social movements the abovementioned aspect which I call a movement's media apparatus, it is insufficient to simply study the way in which the identity of a movement is institutionally stabilized. By constraining ourselves to this empirical level of analysis, we will not be able to explain why there is a movement (that is, identification, protest, and the need for organization) in the first place, nor will we be able to determine the underlying logic of political mobilization. If we move to this general level of conceptualization, we will have to completely invert what is usually understood by the function of media: by extending the basic parameters of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory onto the field of media theory it can be argued that mediality, understood as the very *condition* of every mediatic or apparational construction of identity, consists not so much in the connection of dispersed elements (be it through transmission or ritualization), than in an initial moment of radical separation. In other words, it may be assumed that at the core of every mediatic practice, we find its condition of possibility, a moment of antagonism, that is, a moment of *the political* (I have discussed the difference between politics and the political extensively in Marchart, 2007). As is well known to readers of Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), a translation of heterogeneous elements into a chain of equivalence can only be established if the latter refers to something common to all these elements. Yet this "identical something" cannot be another element since, in that case, it would simply be part of the equivalential chain in the first place. What all the elements share, on the contrary, is their relation towards an instance of radical negation that allows for the establishment of the chain. It is only vis-à-vis such a negatory outside that differences can be articulated into a common equivalence, that is, identity. On the most

> elementary level it is this negatory instance within the discursive – that is, antagonism – which provides some sense of coherence to a given movement and allows participants to recognize themselves in common demands, that is, to subjectivize themselves into "protesters." The public sphere emerging from a process of antagonization must not be confused with the mediatic sphere, in the sense of the movement's media apparatus or the sphere of traffic and circulation in which protest events tend to occur. A public comes into being wherever a given place or institution is touched by antagonism – nothing is public without such transformation. The street, by the same token, is not a public space but a sphere for the circulation of traffic; only when circulation is blocked – through barricades or the protest event of a street manifestation – is a public sphere in the strict sense generated. It is for this reason that there is a "mediatic" aspect to antagonism (as the instance which connects by separating), which is why I propose to understand mediality precisely along the lines of *the political*, and not so much along the lines of media *politics*. In analogy to the concept of the political, the concept of mediality designates, in my view, the instance in a communication process that serves as the very condition of possibility of community (identity), while at the same time – given that a community can only be established through separation, communication through disconnection, association through dissociation – rendering impossible the eventual achievement of a state of undisturbed communication or communion.[4]

That we have to differentiate between the mediality of antagonism and "the media" (mediatic practices and apparatuses) in the narrow sense follows, in my view, from the distinctive approach of discourse theory. As I have shown elsewhere (Marchart, 2004), recourse to the philosophical notion of the ontological difference – the difference between an ontic and an ontological level of theorizing – is a consistent feature in Laclau's work, and is transformed in Mouffe's (2005) work into the difference between politics and the political. What may appear to some as a mere peculiarity – the fact that discourse theory consists of both an empirical and a philosophical branch – in fact constitutes its particular nature. Discourse theory is distinguished from other approaches in the social sciences by the very ambivalence inscribed in its notion of "theory": on the one hand, the latter provides instruments for empirical application in the form of discourse *analysis*, on the other hand – and to the extent that the conditions of possibility of signification as such are at stake – the term "theory" designates a quasi-transcendental way of

reasoning that is intrinsically philosophical. It is philosophical not only because Laclau, Mouffe and other scholars associated with the Essex School paradigm frequently seek recourse to philosophical texts and authors (Wittgenstein, Husserl, Derrida, et al.). It is philosophical, first and foremost, because it is based on a perspective that allows for the observation of the ontological difference *as difference* – which from the nominalist or empiricist perspective of so-called positive science would simply be un-observable. In what follows, I will therefore discuss what *media politics* might designate, and how it could be tackled theoretically, from the twofold perspective of "the media" and "mediality." In the first case, I seek to develop a discourse theoretical concept of media by confronting the "Essex" idea of politics both with the media studies approach in the "Birmingham" tradition and with a renewed interpretation of Althusserian apparatus theory. In the second case, I will advocate a notion of mediality and "publicness" that takes into account the discourse theoretical concept of the political; that is, antagonism.

The mediatic apparatus: Material practices of micro-subjectivation

Discourse theory is often criticized for focusing on the "merely discursive" while ignoring social "materiality." This critique is entirely unfounded, first of all because it presupposes a dualism between discourse and materiality. Contrary to what is insinuated by its critics, it is assumed in the Essex School approach that there is a material dimension to discourse. But what does this material dimension consist of? I submit that the materiality of the discursive has to do with the fact that every discursively articulated configuration, in order to retain stability over time, has to be sustained within networks of practices and institutions.[5] To designate this dimension, Laclau (1990) tends to speak about *sedimentations* of the social (as opposed to their political moment of institution and potential reactivation). To the extent that social movements, as it was claimed above, are stabilized through institutions such as alternative and counter media, as well as through the mediatic practices associated with them, these media provide protest discourses with a certain degree of social materiality: they constitute what I have called a movement's "mediatic apparatus." If we want to develop further, on a more "ontic" level, Laclau's general theory of sedimentation/reactivation, it is perhaps advisable to turn towards the work done in the Birmingham School approach of media studies and its critique of (post-) Althusserian apparatus theory.

The former Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham is well known, among other things, for the non-deterministic form of media studies developed there in the 1970s. This approach broke with stimulus/response – or cause/effect models of behaviorist science in general and the so-called *uses and gratifications* approach in particular. It resulted in the idea of a media audience actively "decoding" media messages, thus contributing to the communication process. This model also provided a background for the Birmingham critique of Althusserian apparatus theory and "screen theory." Relying on Lacanian psychoanalysis and Althusser's famous essay on *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, theorists like Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz, translated into English for *Screen* magazine, came to define the cinematic apparatus as an ensemble which, in the widest sense, included film technology, the situation of projection (a darkened room, a ray of light, and so on), and eventually the film or film "text" itself. According to screen theorists, it is within such an ensemble that the technological intersects with the psychical, and the subject is interpellated by the cinematic apparatus. Althusser's essay continues to be relevant for cinema, media, and communication theories. The Althusserian notion – itself of course derived from Freud's "psychic apparatus" – still echoes in Gregory Ulmer's concept of an "electronic apparatus," or in Derrida's notion of a "tele-technological apparatus." According to Althusser, an individual is interpellated as a subject by Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), that is, by institutions of what Gramsci would have called civil society (*società civile*), which have to be distinguished from Repressive State Apparatuses (such as government, bureaucracy, army, police, the judicial, and the penitentiary system). While the latter apparatuses rely, to a significant degree, on force, the former – including churches, public and private schools, family, unions, and the "political ISA" – rely, if formulated in Gramscian terms, on consent, and consensus.

It is quite telling from a media studies perspective that Althusser includes in his list of ISAs also what he calls "the communications ISA (press, radio and television, etc.)" as well as "the cultural ISA (literature, the arts, sports, etc.)" (1972, p. 96). His idea of media and communication seems very much bound to the traditional transmission view of communication. This becomes clearer again from the role attributed to the communications ISA. As each ISA contributes in its own way to the reproduction of the relations of production, the communications apparatus does so by "cramming every 'citizen' with daily doses of nationalism, chauvinism, liberalism, moralism, and so forth, by means of the press, the radio and television. The same goes for the cultural apparatus

(the role of sport in chauvinism is of the first importance), etc." (1972, p. 104). Such a notion of citizens being "crammed" with their daily doses of ideology is not only a remnant of vulgar ideology critique, it also comes close to a behaviorist understanding of communication (and Althusser's idea of culture does not fare much better). At the same time, however, this transmission model is counter-balanced by elements of a ritual model of communication implied in the more innovative aspects of Althusser's conceptualization of ideology as thoroughly *material*. The individual is interpellated into a subject by way of being submitted to material, institutional practices. The actions of an individual are inserted into practices "governed by the *rituals* in which these practices are inscribed, within the material existence of an *ideological apparatus*, be it only a small part of that apparatus: a small mass in a small church, a funeral, a minor match at a sports club, a school day, a political party meeting, etc." (p. 114). And, a few lines later, it is again emphasized that the ideas of an individual "*are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject*" (p. 114). We have thus arrived at a crucial moment in Althusser's text where the macrological perspective, concerned with the question of reproduction, is being turned toward the micrological level of practices, since the different modalities of materiality are played out in the micro-practices attached to a given ideological apparatus: "the materialities of a displacement for going to mass, of kneeling down, of the gesture of the sign of the cross, or of the *mea culpa*, of a sentence, of a prayer, of an act of contrition, of a penitence, of a gaze, of a hand-shake, of an external verbal discourse or an 'internal' verbal discourse (consciousness)" (p. 114). By these means the realm of ideas is traced back to the material realm of practices. Ideological belief – or, if we are prepared to leave behind the language of ideology critique, *discourse* – is basically "out there," in the imaginary web of relations within which a subject is entangled and continues entangling his- or herself through a multitude of material practices. It is obvious that if we were to study these micro-practices *in concreto*, we would have to turn towards ethnographic methodology. The consequences are clear for the study of a given apparatus of protest media: it will be important to analyze the practices and rituals involved in the media usage of a given social movement.

Communication: The "politics of signification"

In the late 1970s apparatus theory – both in the Althusserian and in the screen theory variant – came under increased scrutiny from Birmingham

Cultural Studies. What was considered problematic was the unclear relation between the universal form of the subject (being the result of ideological interpellation) and the highly diverse interpellations, apparatuses, and "ideologies." In other words, between the universal form of the subject and the particular content of ideologies. How come that the always specific practices and ideologies do not touch at the very form of the subject? Why are interpellations, discourses, practices, and so forth, always different, but the resulting "subject" is always the same? Is it indeed possible that there exists such a thing as the subject in his/her mere form, an empty subject of self-consciousness untouched by identity markers such as race, class, gender, age, and so forth? While questions like these, implicated by the Althusserian ISA-model, have been considered more recently (Butler 1997), they were being discussed as early as the late 1970s. From a "Birmingham" perspective, it appeared implausible that a subject emerged – out of nothing – on a single point of identification within a single (cinematic) apparatus. Rather, the subject was assumed to be formed by discursive practices cutting across a given subject throughout his/her whole history (Morley, 1980, p. 164). And, if this was the case, s/he could not be the result of singular cinematic text, as Stuart Hall observed *contra* screen theory:

> This theory gives texts a central place. Texts do not express a meaning (which resides elsewhere) or "reflect reality": they produce a representation of "the real" which the viewer is positioned to take as a mirror reflection of the real world: this is the "productivity of the text.". . . However, this "productivity" no longer depends in any way on the ideological effectivity of the representations produced, nor on the ideological problematics within which the discourse is operating, not on the social, political or historical practices with which it is articulated. Its "productivity" is defined exclusively in terms of the capacity of the text to set the viewer in place in a position of unproblematic identification/knowledge. And that, in turn, is founded on the process of formation of the subject. (Hall, 1980, p. 159)

As a reaction to this sort of textualism, David Morley and Stuart Hall, by turning toward the audience, started to engage with more sociological and ethnographic approaches. Now, the *audience* was no longer understood as consisting of passively interpellated subjects, but was assumed to be highly active in the process of constituting meaning. Without doubt, there was a tendency later to over-stretch the "turn" toward the audience, resulting in what has been criticized as "Cultural Populism" (McGuigan, 1992), in which the reader or viewer is elevated

to a voluntaristic subject of dissidence who is supposed to construct the meaning of texts – mostly in a subversive fashion – *ad libitum*. The significance of this "turn" is to be found elsewhere. It consisted in a well-founded critique of behaviorist models of communication of which even Althusser, as shown above, was not entirely free. At first, representatives of the "Birmingham" approach broke with the idea of the message (= the text) as a transparent vehicle of meaning. If the meaning of a message is at least *co*-constructed by an active audience, it cannot be entirely prefigured in the message alone. The focus of analysis thus shifts toward "meaning structures" or discourses with the help of which signification is produced (this is the very point of Stuart Hall's famous encoding/decoding model). In consequence of what Hall called the "rediscovery of 'ideology' in media studies," a notion of ideology (or power) was elaborated which allowed for a convincing conceptualization of the political dimension of communication. The function of mediatic apparatuses was now seen in securing the circulation of hegemonic meaning structures in and through media, that is, in their "politics of signification."

The demise of Marxist doctrines of classism and economic determinism in the 1970s, together with the rediscovery of Gramsci, opened the possibility for Cultural Studies to view the process of hegemonic articulation – that is, of the political construction of meaning – as being located on *all* levels of social practice (which is a theoretical development that occurred simultaneously in "Essex" and "Birmingham" in the late 1970s and early 1980s – the difference being that in Essex the focus was on politics and the state, while in Birmingham the focus was on culture and the media). The last remnants of the orthodox idea of an economic "base" determining the "superstructure" and being "mirrored" by cultural texts were abandoned, as the concept of hegemony allowed us to view the "superstructure" (the culture, the media) as a decisive battlefield of social struggle. In order to secure hegemony, it is not enough to socialize the means of production. Consensus with regard to a given status quo or a political project (a "collective will") had to be established via "moral and intellectual leadership," as Gramsci claimed, whereby the limits of what was sayable and thinkable in a given historical conjuncture were determined without the employment of force. *In nuce*, such a Gramscian approach was already present in Althusser's essay on the ISAs; for instance when it is underlined that a precondition for permanently capturing state power consists in achieving hegemony in and over ISAs – yet, of course, no linguistic theory of discourse was developed by Althusser.

As Hall (1982) describes in one of his, in my view, most important contributions, the essay "The rediscovery of ideology: Return of the repressed in media studies," the media are of the highest importance in the "struggle over meaning" or the "struggle in discourse," of what Hall calls "the politics of signification." The latter term implies that the power to endow a particular event with meaning results from a complicated and mobile balance of forces – what Gramsci called a "war of position." In modern societies, the media are a key player in this struggle because, for Hall, they are the dominant means of social signification in modern societies (1982, p. 83) (therein he departs from Althusser who assigned the couple school/family this role in modern societies, more or less ignoring the important function of the media). In the twentieth century, the media – because of their economic, technological, social, and cultural resources – have achieved a decisive and fundamental leadership within the cultural sphere (note that in these passages Hall is attributing to the media the force of an *agent*, of what Gramsci would have called an "organic intellectual").

As *signifying institutions,* they provide the contemporary means that allow social groups and classes to construct an image of values, opinions and practices, concerning both their own position and the position of other groups and classes: "This is the first of the great cultural functions of the modern media: the provision and selective construction of social knowledge, of social imaginary, through which we perceive the 'worlds,' the 'lived realities' of others, and imaginarily reconstruct their lives and ours into some intelligible 'world-of-the-whole,' some 'lived totality' " (Hall, 1977, pp. 340–1). Secondly, media produce a repertoire of images and ideas that makes it possible to arrange the fragmented features of the social into a meaningful whole. They produce normative and evaluative classifications and hierarchies which allow for the mapping of the social. As signifying institutions, they thus constitute a social imaginary whose inventory of classifications allows for arranging social reality into some consensual and relatively coherent order. Through media, diverging opinions are rearranged into a "mystical unity" of consensus (p. 339). If this should be the case, though, it is not feasible anymore to conceptualize media as institutions which only reflect a pre-given hegemonic consensus, rather they actively produce it; they are apparatuses for the manufacturing of consensus (and *common sense*).

One aspect is of particular importance from an "Essex School" perspective: Hall makes it sufficiently clear that the manufacturing of consensus

can only occur via *conflict* and *exclusion*. Therefore, media structure hegemony by

> establishing the "rules" of each domain, actively ruling in and ruling out certain realities, offering the maps and codes which mark out territories and assign problematic events and relations to explanatory contexts, helping us not simply to know more about "the world" but to make sense of it. Here the line, amidst all its contradictions, in conditions of struggle and contradiction, between preferred and excluded explanations and rationales, between permitted and deviant behaviours, between the "meaningless" and the "meaningful," between the incorporated practices, meanings and values and the oppositional ones, is ceaselessly drawn and redrawn, defended and negotiated: indeed, the "site and stake" of struggle. (p. 341)

In short, the politics of the media in their function as "signifying institutions" consists in hegemonically fixing and mapping meaning. In this way, media contribute to producing, sustaining and enlarging a hegemonic formation. Given what was said in the beginning of the chapter, however, three observations have to be added.

Firstly, media function as "signifying institutions" not simply because ideological messages are transmitted, but because every mediatic apparatus is always already embedded in, and only activated through, particular practices. These practices – the way we "use" the media in more or less ritualized ways – are embedded in turn in our larger collective practices of subjectivation. This aspect is captured nicely in Benedict Anderson's observation of the role a "mass ceremony," such as reading a newspaper, plays in the construction of imagined communities:

> We know that particular morning and evening editions will overwhelmingly be consumed between this hour and that, only on this day, not that. . . . The significance of this mass ceremony – Hegel observed that newspapers serve modern man as a substitute for morning prayers – is paradoxical. It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. Furthermore, this ceremony is incessantly repeated at daily or half-daily intervals throughout the calendar. What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked, imagined community can be envisioned? At

> the same time, the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life. (Anderson, 1991, pp. 35–6)[6]

Even though these two approaches are played out against each other regularly, it is imperative to understand that such a ritual view of communication does not contradict a "textual" view that would focus on the "content" level of hegemonic imaginaries distributed via media. To speak about media as "signifying institutions" implies that both their institutional dimension (including the ritualized practices of media usage) and their "signifying" dimension have to be taken into account. The term *discourse*, I submit, contains both dimensions. Bringing together, on a theoretical plane of comparison, Birmingham Media Studies (in both their ethnographic and its discourse analytic strands), (Post-)Althusserian apparatus theory and Essex School discourse theory therefore allows us to arrive at the following formula of discourse: *linguistic text* + *material apparatus* = *discourse*.

Secondly, it has to be added that such a definition of discourse, along the lines of hegemony theory, allows us to circumvent the active/passive dilemma with regard to the category of the subject (as the passive result of interpellation) involved in Althusser's apparatus theory, and the opposite view involved in an active audience approach. If the linguistic stratum of a given hegemonic imagery is necessarily to be activated through particular practices, these practices will in turn be able to shift the ways in which a given message, to use Hall's term, is decoded. Such decoding is not a passive form of reception, but must be understood as a particular intervention, as minute as it may be, into the very meaning structures of a given hegemonic formation. A similar point has been made by Judith Butler (1997) in her Foucauldian/Derridean engagement with Althusser's theory of interpellation. As long as subjectivation is conceptualized, as Althusser does, as the repetitive execution of rituals pre-formatted by an ISA, subjectivation will be equated with *subjection* to the force of interpellation. But if it is assumed, with Derrida, that repetition of the identical is impossible and that, rather, a fundamental "iterability" produces constant shifts and differentiations, then we arrive at an entirely different conclusion: no ritual will manage to guarantee an identical repetition of practices; hence, no subject is fully "subjected" to the force of interpellation. Instead, practices of subjectivation can very well allow for processes of *de*-subjection, subversion, disagreement, or dissent – that is, for shifts within the hegemonic balance of forces.

Thirdly, if this is agreed upon, then it will also be conceded that "the media" must not be imagined as monolithic fortresses in the service of a single dominant ideology. Instead, we must consider the idea of a politically structured *counter-apparatus*, including the idea of counter-*mediatic* apparatuses sustained by a network of oppositional practices. Not only are hegemonic discourses, as we encounter them via our mass media, "decoded" in potentially subversive or counter-hegemonic ways, there will also exist signifying institutions that are not directly linked to a given hegemonic formation, but embedded in the counter-hegemonic rituals of, for instance, social movements. These remarks obviously connect to the discussion at the beginning of this chapter on the construction of a counter-hegemonic consensus by social movements. Social movements seek to achieve this, undoubtedly, long-term goal by institutionally inscribing their political demands into a mediatic apparatus of their own. Such apparatus may have a number of functions, from providing space for reflection and internal debates to simply functioning as a propaganda tool; yet it would be impossible to conceive protest communication without taking into account any such forms of institutional support. It is at this point where a hegemony theory approach to protest discourse departs from a more conventional perspective in social movement research (where, in the latter case, the main aim of social movements would be located in their attempt at getting mass media coverage of their actions).

For reasons of space, I will not be able to expand on the topic of alternative and counter media (for the findings of our empirical research, see Marchart et al., 2010, 2007). I will instead concentrate on a further and more fundamental question which imposes itself: by what criterion are we able to determine whether the predicate "counter," that is, the oppositional quality of a given counter-apparatus, is rightfully attributed? To answer this question we are compelled to leave media theory and immerse ourselves in a theory of *mediality*.

The Political: Mediality and conflict

So far, the whole of our discussion has turned around the dimension of *media politics* as a *politics of signification*. While, in Althusser, political practice in a strict sense is unthinkable as long as an individual is passively interpellated into a subject, Birmingham Cultural Studies have a double notion of politics available: the subversive or oppositional "politics" of an active audience and a more general "politics of signification" as incorporated by the media. What so far seems to be lacking in this debate,

however, is a notion of *the political* as the very criterion which allows us to designate something as an *oppositional* practice of signification, a practice, that is, which amounts to more than a slight deflection of hegemonic discourses produced via *iterability*. Such a counter-practice, as in the case of social movements, aims at the staging of open conflict rather than silent subversion. In order to theorize such practice, it is recommendable, I submit, to introduce a category of the political that resonates with Laclau and Mouffe's concept of antagonism. Their concept designates the radical instance which both allows for the precarious construction of society (because the latter can only establish some degree of identity vis-à-vis a radical, negatory outside), but at the same time, and as the very limit of society, antagonism makes it impossible for society to establish itself in terms of a social totality. From here we have to conclude that a social formation is simply unthinkable that is not based on such a radical instance of conflict. Of course, Cultural Studies, to the extent that they define the media as a "site and stake of struggle," and take into account the exclusion of alternative discourses in the hegemonic process of manufacturing consensus, also employ a concept of conflict.[7] But in the Essex School approach, aptly described as post-foundational, conflict is located on a much more profound level: the level of the ground, and simultaneously abyss, of the social. This is where the term antagonism – the condition of possibility and, at the same time, impossibility of society – has to be located.

Put in terms of Heidegger's onto-ontological difference, a concept frequently used by Laclau (see Marchart, 2004), politics (conflict) has to be located on the ontic plane of the social while the political (antagonism) refers to the ontological dimension of society. This is to say that politics in the traditional meaning – the political system or the actions of the functional elite of this system – should not be mistaken for the political in its radical sense. Social institutions can exist without open conflict (politics is not everywhere), but there can be no society without antagonism. On the other hand, it is obvious that politics will always be, to some degree, bound to institutional apparatuses (parties, movements, and so on) and institutionalized practices. Antagonism, actualized through politics, is always ontically mediated and never available in its "pure," ontological form – otherwise we would be talking not about politics but rather about a Hobbesian war of all against all. The terrain of the social (and its institutions) is not only defined by a hegemonic balance of forces, but also ridged by a multiplicity of lines of conflict – every single line instantiating, within a particular configuration, the ontological condition of groundlessness, impossibility, and antagonism.

As a matter of fact, discourse theory in the Essex School tradition, because of its propensity to philosophical thinking, is the only neo- or post-Gramscian theory that allows itself to conceptualize a notion of the political, as antagonism, on an ontological level. But how do these considerations relate to the concept of media? Obviously, both the institutional apparatuses of mass media and the counter-hegemonic institutions of alternative and counter media have to be located at the ontic level of the social (and of politics). This ontic dimension has to be differentiated, I submit, from the dimension of mediality by which, in analogy to the concept the political, we should not simply envision a moment of transmission or communication, but a moment of radical antagonistic separation. I do not intend to claim that mediality and the political are one and the same. This would amount to a mere duplication of categories. What I wish to submit is the hypothesis that mediality constitutes the specific perspective under which the political can be integrated into media theory and theories of communication. In analogy to the relation antagonism/society, mediality can thus be defined as the instance by which, in the process of communication, community is both established and rendered impossible at the same time. This definition amounts to much more than a scholastic exercise with meaningless conceptual distinctions. In fact, it has radical consequences for many customary categories of media and communication theory. Let us, by way of conclusion, just consider the category of public sphere.

That a public sphere is constituted by media is a rather common preconception, encapsulated in a formula like Mark Poster's: "the media *are* the public sphere" (Poster, 1997, p. 217). As such, media – as defined above – are not much more than apparatuses (signifying institutions) sustained by certain practices. Whether or not the effects of "publicness" are produced by the media is a question that should not be prejudged. It depends on whether or not the dimension of mediality – that is, of the political within communication – enters the picture by antagonistically breaking up the ritualized ways in which media are structured and *turning* them into public spaces. In other words, the public only emerges when, by way of antagonization, a breach is effectuated within a given hegemonic formation. With mediality there is, to use Leonard Cohen's phrase, "a crack in everything – that's how the light gets in." Hence, the public sphere must not be conceptualized as a container within which particular debates may or may not occur; on the contrary, it is the form antagonism finds within a determinate institutional formation. Media, as a part of such formation, do not generate a public space – except in those instances when they are touched by the mediality of antagonism.

If the latter amounts to what Laclau and Mouffe call the "constitutive outside" of any social formation, then it will of course be impossible for us to gain immediate access to this outside – it can only be experienced through the cracks and fissures emerging within a given social formation in conflictual situations. But what exactly is "communicated" in such a situation as defined by the mediality of antagonism? Returning to Laclau's framing of the political in *New Reflections* (1990), we may arrive at the following conclusion: what is "communicated" is not so much this or that political content or particular demand. What is "communicated," on the most fundamental level, through the mediality of antagonism is precisely the ultimate absence of any foundation of the social. Laclau's technical term for this is *contingency*, and it is specifically the contingent nature of a given a state of affairs which becomes visible in the moment of antagonism, when it is revealed that *things could be otherwise*. A public sphere is nothing other than a space opened by the mediality of antagonism, a space wherein the very incompletion and ungrounded nature of any community is communicated.

Notes

1. This article results from a research project on media and protest funded by the Swiss National Fund.
2. Most traditional communication models (see, for instance, McQuail & Windahl, 1993), especially those which could be aligned with a "transmission view" of communication, understand communication as taking place between pre-constituted entities (sender, receiver, message, and so on). The hegemony theory concept of *articulation* would suggest the opposite view: It is precisely through a process of articulation/communication that the identity of all entities involved is established.
3. For Gramsci, given the historical constellation in which his theory was elaborated, the "organizing function" of such a collective organic intellectual was supposed to be filled out by the party and its members and functionaries. Yet this in no way precludes a translation of his concepts into our own historical constellation, characterized by the emergence of new social movements and transnational networks of movements.
4. It is this moment of mediality that allows for highly diverse institutional practices, seemingly structured in a differential way, to be attributed to one and the same movement (or movement network).
5. I am leaving aside the question regarding the materiality of the signifier (its phonic substance). For a discussion of this aspect see Sumic-Riha (2004) and Laclau's rejoinder (2004).
6. A similar point has been made by David Morley (1992, p. 268) apropos television news: "the fact of watching and engaging in a joint ritual with millions

of others can be argued to be at least as important as any informational content gained from the broadcast."

7. I have discussed and criticized more extensively a Cultural Studies idea of "micro-politics" from the perspective of an "Essex School" theory of antagonism in Marchart (2003a,b).

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4

What Does Democracy Feel Like? Form, Function, Affect, and the Materiality of the Sign

Jeremy Gilbert

What does democracy feel like? This question can hardly be considered unimportant, given the centrality to so much political thought of ideas of sentiment, feeling, and passion. From Aristotle to Žižek, the tradition of "western" philosophy has been well aware that processes of political affiliation, disaffiliation, and decision could never be understood simply in terms of a disembodied logic or an abstract rationality. "Discourse theory" (which for the purpose of this chapter will be taken to refer in a precise way to the work of Laclau and Mouffe and their immediate followers) has always been informed heavily by psychoanalysis' emphasis on the irreducibility of the unconscious and on the porous boundary between rational cognition and somatic systems of pleasure and pain, and so clearly does not stand outside of that lineage in this regard. And yet it is difficult to know where we would look within discourse theory or indeed within much of a wider psychoanalytical tradition, for tools with which to begin to address this question.

In this chapter I will offer some reflections on the issues involved in pursuing the question of what democracy feels like, beginning in a perhaps surprising place: an investigation of the precise status of the concept of the sign. As we will see, this is a key issue because the question of the sign's abstract or formal status, in relation to the material substance that carries or expresses it, is fundamental to any approach to the issue of the sensuality of discourse. Arguably the single most important thinker on this issue was the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev, whom Laclau cites most approvingly and whom Deleuze and Guattari draw on heavily for their own contribution to semiotic theory, emphasizing as it does the variable functional roles that different types of object, element, material, substance, or device can play in multiple signifying systems. I will then

suggest the usefulness – even perhaps, the indispensability – of such an approach to the analysis of contemporary media forms, such as TV talent shows, which play complex but very important roles in the reproduction of neoliberal hegemony, finally offering some speculative remarks on the type of cultural formation that might, by contrast, be understood as generating types of affect and modes of relationality that could be characterised as "radically democratic."

The formality of the sign

"Discourse theory" after Laclau and Mouffe and the mainstream of Anglophone cultural theory – which has defined the terms of much academic media analysis since the 1970s – share both a political history and a common set of theoretical reference points (Gilbert, 2004). Unsurprisingly, these commonalities have also tended to result in a common set of lacunae, which bear particularly upon the role (or absence) of media institutions and technologies, understood in their material and sensual specificity rather than as neutral carriers of "discourse," in their accounts of politics and culture. Conceptually, this shared set of absences would seem to be organized around a problem-space that has become central to recent debates in cultural theory and which poses particularly interesting problems for both traditions: it is the issue of *affect*, which demands to be rigorously theorized if this problem-space is to be traversed. While the term "affect" does not have a wholly stable meaning – being entirely synonymous with "emotion" in some theoretical vocabularies – the increasingly consensual understanding of the term uses it to designate a continuum of experience that encompasses raw physical sensations at one extreme and clearly demarcatable emotions at the other, on the understanding that a materialist conception of reality must endorse the classically Spinozist view that all such experience is simultaneously, indissolubly, cognitive and corporeal.

In contrast to both older and more recent approaches that pay close attention to questions of affect, both "discourse theory" and methods of cultural analysis informed directly by semiotics have tended to privilege the semantic elements of political and cultural discourse as their main or exclusive objects of concern, to the exclusion of attention to the sensual or affective dimensions of discourse; this is despite the fact that both traditions have been informed by nominally materialist sets of philosophical presuppositions that would seem implicitly to endorse a close attention to the corporeal nature of all culture and all forms of political

experience. Within the general field of media studies, this emphasis marks out both approaches as relatively unusual in their apparently overriding interest in the *contents* of various types of discourse, as distinct from the question of the sensual and institutional specificity of particular media, cultural and institutional *forms* (the latter being the overriding obsession of other approaches to the theorisation of media, from McLuhan, 1964; to Mulvey, 1989; to Massumi, 2002). The reasons for such an emphasis are entirely justifiable. A study of shifting attitudes to race in contemporary Britain, for example, arguably gains more than it loses from its capacity to attend to manifestations of such attitudes using a methodology that is not tied to specific media, which is exactly what is offered by the language of semiotics. But it is also crucial to note that at the level of theory – rather than the level of individual analyses – this methodology is necessarily subtended by a powerful set of *formal* theoretical assumptions: in particular, the assumption that the logic of signification as described by Saussure and extended to social relations and visual iconography by Lévi-Strauss and Barthes respectively is more or less stable, continuous, and applicable across these diverse fields. I therefore propose to begin investigating some of the issues at stake here with reference to this crude but nonetheless potentially useful distinction between "form" and "content."

It is important to note that, for the most part, the question of the "form/content distinction" has been discussed in relation to Laclau's work exclusively with reference to the question of how far his model of political/ethical logic is indifferent to any particular *normative* content, or independent of any prior ethical commitment (Butler, Laclau, & Žižek, 2000; Critchley & Marchart, 2004; Marchart, 2007[1]). This is a fascinating question to which we will have to return, however casually; but, for the present, I want to concentrate on the question of the danger of formalism at a purely *analytical* level. This is an issue that is touched on in Laclau's exchange with Judith Butler, when Laclau makes an explicit defense of the whole structuralist theoretical adventure that has informed both his work and the cultural studies tradition described above. I will cite two passages from Laclau's contributions to this exchange. Let me make clear at this early stage that I am going to highlight some potential problems with Laclau's presentation of a particular argument, but only for the sake of clarifying a position that I take ultimately to be in full agreement with his.

In the first passage, Laclau refers to the problematic status of the relationship between signifier and signified in Saussure's original exposition of the concept of the sign, and "the isomorphism postulated by

Saussure between the order of the signifier and the order of the signified." Laclau goes on:

> It was very quickly realised that such an isomorphism led to a contradiction with the principle that language is form, and not substance, which was the cornerstone of Saussurean linguistics. For if there was total isomorphism between the order or the signifier and the order of the signified, it was impossible to distinguish one from the other in purely formal terms, so that the only alternatives were either to maintain a strict formalism that would necessarily lead to the collapse of the distinction between signifier and signified (and the dissolution of the category of sign) or to smuggle – inconsistently – the substance (phonic and conceptual) into linguistic analysis. It was at this point that the decisive break was made by Hjelmslev and the Copenhagen School, who broke with the principle of isomorphism and constructed the difference between the two orders – signifier and signified – in purely formal terms. . . .
>
> This leads me, however, to stress a second point which goes, to some extent, in the opposite direction from the first. There have been certain forms of argumentation, in Lacanian circles, which tend to emphasize what has been called the "materiality of the signifier." Now, if by "materiality" one refers to the bar which breaks the transparency of the process of signification (the isomorphism referred to above), this notion would be unobjectionable. But what is important is not to confuse "materiality" in this sense with the phonic substance as such, because in that case we would be reintroducing substance into the analysis, and we would fall back into the inconsistent Saussurean position discussed above. (Butler, Laclau, & Žižek, 2000, pp. 69–70)

In the second passage he writes:

> In my previous contribution to this exchange, I argued that the formalization of the Saussurean model by the Copenhagen and Prague Schools made possible the cutting of the umbilical cord of linguistic categories with the phonic and conceptual substances, and, thus, opened the way to a generalized semiology. . . . Thus Barthes, in the 1960s, tried to see how linguistic categories such as the distinctions signifier/signified, syntagm/paradigm, and so on, could operate at the level of other social grammars: the alimentary code, the fashion system, furniture, and so forth. Today, of course, we have moved well beyond Barthes, but the possibility of generalizing the use of linguistic

> categories to various levels of social organization is as valid today as it was in the 1960s. It is in this precise sense that many of us have tried to introduce linguistic and rhetorical devices into the study of politics, devices that we have found more promising and fruitful than the alternative approaches available on the market, such as rational choice, structural functionalism, systems theory, and others.
>
> Now, it is true that this generalization of linguistic categories was made possible by the increasing formalism of linguistic analysis and its detachment from the substances which had been the "material objects" of classic linguistics. Does this mean, however, as Butler suggests, that this approach 'separates the formal analysis of language from its cultural and social syntax and semantics'? Hardly. To come back for a moment to Barthes: when he is applying linguistic categories to his different semiological systems, he is not just taking those categories as formal entities which remain selfsame independently of the context of their operation, but as being contaminated and partially deformed by those contexts. Thus, a category such as the signifier has to be partially changed when we move to the system of fashion, and so on. This contamination of the abstract by the concrete makes the realm of formal categories more a world of 'family resemblances' in the Wittgensteinian sense, than the self-contained formal universe of Butler. At some point, of course, the family resemblances could become too loose and too tenuous, and a change of paradigm could become necessary. (Butler, Laclau, & Žižek, 2000, p. 190)

The moment that Laclau refers to here, when Barthes adopts the language of linguistics for the study of semiotics systems such as fashion, is undoubtedly *the* key moment in the formation of the semiotic paradigm of media and cultural analysis; and Laclau's treatment of it here is absolutely central for purposes of our discussion. It is interesting to note, however, that the specific complex of issues which we are interested in are not engaged directly, and, at first glance, it might appear that Laclau actually takes a contradictory position on them. From the perspective of a concern with questions of media-specificity and of "affect," it is not so much "cultural and social syntax and semantics" with which we are concerned, as the question of what difference, if any, it might make to our understanding of specific discourses, to pay close attention to the specific media in which they are expressed and the affective qualities which they possess.

Now, Laclau actually makes two allusions to this set of issues. On the one hand, he insists on the pure formalization of the logic of signification

as absolutely axiomatic to linguistic analysis, such that "substance" cannot feature in it at all; on the other, he acknowledges that the notion of the signifier must itself undergo some change when it is deployed in a context such as the fashion system. Now, we could easily defend Laclau at this point, on the grounds that Hjelmslev himself argues persuasively that what is specific to language as such – as distinct from other kinds of semiotic system – is in part its complete independence of substance and of particular "forms of expression"; this is what makes it uniquely possible to *use* language to discuss other semiotic systems that cannot themselves be used in the same way (one can use language to discuss music; one cannot very usefully use music to discuss linguistics). By the same logic, we must presume that the difference between the notion of the sign as it migrates from one semiotic system to another must be connected to the fact that the "substance" of one signifying system is different from the other, and that any semiotic system which is not purely linguistic will be more dependent upon its specific substances. Could the difference between the semiological system of fashion and any other be understood in terms which make no reference at all to the deployment of colour, shape, texture, the weight and thickness of fabrics, and so forth, in the fashion system?

Substance, expression, affect

Hjelmslev himself would have made no such claim. Neither, I think, would Laclau; although it is not quite clear within his frame of reference how we would begin to address the specificities of a non-linguistic semiotic system. Hjelmslev actually offers some invaluable pointers. Laclau's exposition of Hjelmslev, cited above, is necessarily a simplification: in fact, Hjelmslev's attempt adequately to formalize the relationship between the signifier and the signified led him to abandon that terminology in favour of a more complex designation of the relationships between "form," "content," "expression" and "substance," according to which the very formality of these categories makes it necessary to stress their mutual dependence in particular contexts.

There is not much more space here for a full exposition of Hjelmslev than Laclau had at his disposal in his exchange with Butler, but the important point to note is that while Hjelmslev stresses the formal independence of linguistic form from substance, he also stresses that these different elements of the process of "expression" or "signification" must be understood not as types of object but as *functions* (Hjelmslev, 1961, pp. 80–1) which can be carried out by very different types of object, of

differing substances. In fact, Hjelmslev argues that "we have not been able to maintain unmodified Saussure's distinction between form and substance, but . . . this difference has proved to be in reality a difference between two forms within different hierarchies," such that "*metasemiology is in practice identical with the so-called description of substance* (Hjelmslev, 1961, pp. 123–4). This is a highly abstract formulation, but the upshot of the argument is merely to observe that there is no formal a priori limit to the complex shifting of roles whereby different elements can come to play different functional roles in different semiological systems. So not only may the signifieds of one semiotic system become signifiers of another, or vice versa, but it is also the case, for example, that the texture of a piece of cloth may have an expressive function in some fashion systems, whereas the texture of the paper on which a book is printed may have no such function within a literary system, even while there may be other (even, perhaps, overlapping) systems within which it would have such a function. Consider, for example, the same book in the hands of a literary critic who is not a book collector, a book collector who is practically illiterate, or a literary connoisseur who is also a collector of vintage editions: in each instance different aspects of the book's physical being would be understood as in some sense meaningful, even while the function of generating the particular meanings in question could not be reduced to any aspect of the actual material substance of the book.

Here, then, is where things start to become interesting; because, from this point of view, the distinction between "form" and "content" does not simply disappear, but rather the nature of their relationship becomes quite variable and wholly unpredictable, as different semiotic systems can use the same elements to carry out quite different functions, and carry out the same functions with different elements. And, from such a perspective, it surely becomes crucial for any understanding of political discourse to consider the complex specificities of the different semiotic systems within which it emerges and the different elements it deploys. To offer a very crude example: from the speeches of the great classical orators to the slogans of contemporary political campaigning, is it not immediately apparent that such issues as the tone of voice in which speeches are delivered or the differences between slogans that work as radio sound-bites, billboard graphics, or televisual snippets are crucial in determining their political efficacy? Was it only Churchill's words that enabled him to occupy his symbolic position as the incarnation of Britain's struggle during the war? Or was it rather the particular configuration of words and intonation which characterized his orations, and the peculiar appropriateness of that configuration to the medium of

mid-twentieth-century radio, which had only recently achieved a level of fidelity appropriate to the conveyance of complex emotional subtleties (without which Churchill's mixture of manic hubris and masochistic diffidence would have been lost on his audience)?

With this example we are clearly moving into the territory of the theorization of "affect." A key question which emerges here is whether or not we can continue to theorize this complex aggregation of semiotic elements in terms of the language of signification whose generalized application Laclau defends in the passage above. It would be possible, arguably, to continue to describe these elements with ever-greater detail in such terms, arguing that, for example, the peculiar timbre of Churchill's voice became itself a "signifier" – even, perhaps, a "tendentially empty signifier" which could be understood as incarnating the "absent fullness" of struggling Britain even while it was not clear at all what it actually "meant." But at this point we would surely have reached the stage at which "the family resemblances [between actual verbal language and other semiotic or social systems] become too loose and too tenuous, and a change of paradigm could become necessary." The tone of a voice does not convey emotion in the way that words convey meaning, through a wholly arbitrary system of relational differences. It conveys emotion partly because of the direct corporeal link between the affective state of which it is an index, the quality of sound which results from the speaker being in such a state, and the mimetic tendency of the listener's body to respond accordingly to such sounds, registering their affective charge on a corporeal level (Massumi, 1996). This does not alter the fact that the *signifying* function of voice tone is as formally separate from the corporeal-phonic substance of the speech and the speaker as the signifying function of words is from their phonic substance, but it rather suggests that there may be *semiotic* dimensions to such a scene that cannot be understood fully in terms of a logic of signification, and this is certainly the implication of Hjelmslev's formulations.

The idea that there might be a dimension to discourse or semiosis that cannot be understood simply in terms of signification is not new to the broad field of post-Marxist discourse theory. The ideas of performativity and of the "illocutionary force" (Austin, 1962) inherent to discourse are fundamental to the field and to most of its contributory philosophical strands (for example, Derrida, 1988). As the above citations should make clear, Laclau's conception of language has nothing to do with any naive realist understanding, and has always been predicated on a grasp of both its constitutive power and inherent instability. But, within that field, relatively little attention has been given to the implications

of the observation that illocutionary force must operate according to logics that are not quite the same as those which govern processes of signification. This does not mean that anything within that field or its key sources precludes such attention, but it does raise a question as to where we might look for resources to enable it.

In fact, this is precisely the issue that Deleuze and Guattari engage with in their investigation of "mixed" and "non-signifying" semiotics and multiple "regimes of signs" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, pp. 75–148). For Deleuze and Guattari, the logics governing processes of signification within different semiotic systems can be wholly variable, not just in terms of the relative roles played by different forms and substances of content and expression, but also in terms of the basic organizing logics that order the relationships between those functions. In their terms, Laclau's exhaustive analysis of the logics of equivalence, difference, hegemony and tendentially empty signifiers would probably only be applicable within the limits of "the signifying regime of the sign" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 117) which they see as typical of "Oedpial" societies (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983), but not necessarily of all human societies. This need not pose any particular problems for Laclau's model to the extent that it is treated as applicable to the analysis of political logics within a very broad, but ultimately delimitable range of historical contexts. Yet it raises the question of how far it might be possible to identify other logics operating outside of, and even inside, those same contexts. At the same time, this approach would seem to open up the possibility of understanding a range of different configurations of discursive practice, political institution, and media technology in the kind of political terms that Laclau has made available for the analysis of political discourse. In fact, as I have suggested elsewhere (Gilbert, 2008, p. 153), there is little practical difference between Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of "discourse" as a term designating a "totality which includes within itself the linguistic and the non-linguistic" (Laclau, 1990, p. 100), and Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of regimes of signs as only operating practically within given "assemblages" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). If there is a difference, it lies in the fact that the language of "assemblage" is perhaps less easily mistaken than the terminology of "discourse" for an idealism that is indifferent to questions of practice, materiality, and institutionality.

So, we have arrived at a point where it should be clear that there is no necessary incompatibility between an approach to the study of political formations informed by Laclau and Mouffe's "discourse theory" and an approach that would draw on Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of assemblages and mixed semiotic systems.[2] It is clear that such a

combined approach would have to look not just at "contents" and not just at "forms," but would approach the question of their dynamic interrelation without preconceived assumptions other than basic ones about the operativity of discursive mechanics and the desirability of "radical democracy," very broadly conceived as a politics informed by a commitment to radical pluralism and a drive to push the disaggregation of concentrations of power beyond the limits set by the liberal democratic tradition (which might be informed by a position derived either from the work of Laclau and Mouffe or Deleuze, Guattari and Connolly: see Howarth, 2008; and Tonder & Thomassen, 2006). Such an approach would also have to be sensitive to the danger of treating media texts as "sensually inert," as this would ultimately be incompatible with the materialist presuppositions of post-Marxist theory, even while such an approach would have to reject any attempt to reduce an analysis of media forms to generalization about the effects of particular media or devices, because this would be to erase the formal gap between expressive form and substance. This is an important point, because it is this observation that would defend us from any simple reversion to McLuhanite technological determinism. Finally, such an approach would have to exhibit an attitude to the status of "affect" exemplified in the following passage from Laclau himself, in his response to Glynos and Stavrakakis's challenge to him to explain the place (or absence) of a properly Lacanian idea of enjoyment in his work:

> My answer is that by discourse I do not understand something restricted to the linguistic conceived in its narrow sense, but a relational complex of which enjoyment is a constitutive element. Let us think for a moment about the symptom. We have in the process of its formation a dimension of repression by which affect is withdrawn from a representation and attached to a substitutive representation. Jouissance results from the experience of satisfaction/dissatisfaction which crystallizes in the symptom. It is clear the linguistic representation is not an 'other' vis-à-vis *jouissance*, but an internal component of *jouissance* itself. And things are not changed by the fact that – as Glynos and Stavrakakis point out, quoting J. A. Miller – jouissance presupposes the body, because the body itself is not a biological datum but is written with signifiers. Conversely, for the reasons that I have indicated above, language cannot function without cathexis (i.e. affective unevenness). It is this sequence of structural/functional moments which includes both linguistic and affective components that I call discourse. (Critchley & Marchart, 2004, p. 303)

It is worth noting again that what Laclau here calls "discourse" would seem to be much closer to what Deleuze and Guattari call "machinic assemblage" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 37) than to what most conventional usages would understand by the term. Whether we accept this point or not, from the point of view that is emerging here, it is surely clear that the linguistic, non-linguistic, affective, and sensuous dimensions of political discourses/assemblages would have to be taken seriously.

"Reality" affects

Let us now consider a concrete example of the kind of phenomenon that such a theoretical orientation would enable us to analyse, which I will discuss with reference to the British case, but which has almost direct parallels throughout much of the developed world. There can be little question that if the category of "hegemony" retains any utility at all in the analysis of contemporary politics, then it must be deployed in this context with reference to the hegemony of neoliberalism. The apparent impossibility of mobilizing any alternative to the core policy assumptions of the neoliberal political programme at the political level – as evinced by the ongoing commitment to those principles on the part of successive governments of completely different political compositions – has been accompanied in recent times by a concomitant dissemination of an aggressively individualistic form of consumerism as almost the only legitimate mode of being for members of British society at any level. Both at the level of public institutions – wherein the only mode of agency offered to most citizens is as "consumers" of both public and private services – and at the level of public culture, wherein the most successful and widely disseminated agencies of that culture have been print publications and television programmes encouraging very particular forms of narcissistic consumption, self-display, and competition.

The most striking manifestation of this culture is the popularization over the past decade of "reality" TV shows, which have, quite unexpectedly, decisively replaced various forms of popular fiction as the most watched and profitable genre of program with a set of formats which typically revolve around highly contrived and very demanding public competitions. Commentators were quick to recognize the extent to which formats such as *Big Brother* seemed to dramatize and normalize a clearly neoliberal model of the self and the social, presenting as a kind of primal social scene a wholly artificial domestic environment in which the behavior of the participants was, by virtue of their participation

itself, inherently competitive.[3] The successor to *Big Brother* as the most successful format has been a set of TV talent shows such as *The X Factor* and *Britain's Got Talent*, which seem to be informed by an ideology that is even more carefully attuned to that which shapes the self-legitimating discourses of contemporary neoliberal governance. Sophisticated forms of such discourse tend to temper their raw individualist assumptions by advocating a positive role for government in ensuring the smooth operation of meritocratic systems of reward. As has been recently argued by Danny Dorling (2010), elite forms of meritocratic ideology can only justify the obviously self-perpetuating nature of inegalitarian institutions and social relations with reference to some notion of innate talent (which is presumed to inhere in those individuals who "happen" to occupy elite positions, which they are thereby presumed to merit according to objective and implicitly egalitarian measures). This is precisely the set of assumptions that is dramatized and manifest in the recent wave of "talent" shows which have spread around the world to dominate global TV schedules, following the initial success of Britain's *Pop Idol* in 2001.

Now, there are several points to make about this situation. The first is that it is clearly not enough in making such an analysis simply to observe the congruence between these two sets of ideologies. It is also necessary to ask exactly how we imagine the relationship between them to operate: by what mechanism is this congruence generated, and how is it thought to be efficacious? If we were asking this question within the purview of a classic Marxian analysis, even from a relatively sophisticated Gramscian or Althusserian perspective, then this would not be difficult to answer. It would be assumed that media outputs, such as the ones just described, largely serve to reproduce an ideological common sense that indirectly represents the interests of the ruling class (or class fraction) to a wider public, interpellating them as its subjects and at least partially recruiting them to it by these means. Now, this remains a largely usable explanation within a post-Marxist discourse analysis framework, which may be skeptical about the objective existence of "class" as a social category, but which would nonetheless recognize the existence of self-defining and self-serving elites (such as the interlocking networks governing major financial, governments, and media institutions in the UK today) and, more importantly, of hegemonic *discourses* involving not just a particular set of meanings but all of the constitutive institutional practices of such elites. From this point of view, programs like *The X Factor* simply *are* a constitutive element of the "relational complex" of hegemonic neoliberalism.

This raises some further questions, however, which are crucial to any analysis of hegemonic relations in a concrete situation. In particular, it raises the question of what is the exact nature of the relationship between this relational complex and those subjects who are recruited to it in this way, who are persuaded or obliged to remain complicit with it, but who do not clearly benefit from it in any direct fashion. The models that have been developed by Laclau and his followers offer a rich set of concepts and terms with which to consider the internal mechanics of hegemonizing discourses, and the means by which they metonymically incorporate ever-widening series of demands into their "chains of equivalence" while constituting "myths" which give some imaginary substance to the community, particularly through the constitution and partial filling of tendentially empty signifiers (Laclau, 1990, 1994, 1996, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). In so far as individual subjects are posited as having any kind of determinable position in these situations, this position has been understood in terms of the capacity of such myths to offer points of identification for subjects, a process which has increasingly been understood by Lacan in strictly Freudo-Lacanian terms (Laclau, 2005; Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2004). From this point of view, it is the capacity of the hegemonic discourse partially to represent the "absent fullness" of both individual selfhood and community identity which renders it operable.

Now, this framework can certainly get us a very long way in understanding how a phenomenon such as *The X Factor* – the most successful talent-show format to have been widely exported from the UK, which selects winners through a process of elimination that combines the famously arbitrary judgments of its celebrity judges with direct voting by viewers at key junctures – functions as an element of the "relational complex" of neoliberalism. Never mind the almost blatantly Lacanian language of the title, implying as it does that the certain "something" which "real" stars possess is an undefinable quality that, by definition, cannot be named. Never mind the rather obvious point that shows such as this one encourage the fantasy of stardom as achievable by any member of the masses, which is important in securing the acquiescence of members of the public who have no real chance of ever joining the hegemonic elite (Adorno made precisely this point over 50 years ago (2002, p. 462)). More importantly, these shows dramatize a number of crucial "truths" that are central to neoliberal mythology: the truth that contemporary life is an endless competition in which rewards are distributed according to talent; the truth that market relations and democratic relations are effectively interchangeable; the truth that human creativity

is essentially a property of individuals which can best be expressed through the cultivation of a certain kind of populist entrepreneurship. Crucially, these "truths" are not merely dramatized in a didactic or narrative form. Rather, the audience themselves, who have the opportunity to influence the competition by telephone voting for their favourite performers, are enabled and encouraged to participate in this drama, in a manner which is designed to echo both of their other main modes of participation in the public sphere: as consumers, and as voters in a political system that restricts their participation to occasional consultation as to which member of the elite they happen to prefer the media profile of at a given moment.

This latter point is crucial, because it brings us back to our earlier speculative distinction between "form" and "content." It is not only the clearly identifiable "content" of neoliberal discourse which is in play here, but a set of institutional and technological "forms" which generates a particular set of relational and affective possibilities. There are two further points to observe here. One is that it would seem to be very difficult to theorize the relationships between subjects and discourse here in any satisfactory way by deploying the normal analytical resources of "discourse theory." While we can clearly identify a set of norms and discursive chains at work here, it is not clear that the audience for these programs identifies with them in the manner that the theory tends to expect such identifications to work. There is no clear "empty signifier" which seems to represent the "absent fullness" of the community of viewers. It is not clear that most of the viewers would offer any conscious, explicit assent to the neoliberal norms which are embodied in the show; in fact, most opinion surveys continue to suggest that a relatively small minority of the British public would be willing to do so (Park et al., 2009). Rather, their participation in this particular relational complex would seem to be at the level of pleasure, excitement, fleeting moments of shared hope and fear, which are generated as much by the self-consciously contrived *formal* mechanics of the show format as by any real identification with the contestants or anything else: in other words, at the level of affect rather than at the level of identity.

Even the most sophisticated theoretical vocabulary available to the discourse theory tradition – that of Lacanian psychoanalysis – would find it difficult at this point to go beyond observing the fact that some of the viewers may identify or disidentify with some of the contestants and enjoy the drama of their victories and losses accordingly, while also enjoying the wider sense of participating in a shared drama as such. This would all be perfectly accurate, but it would leave out so much of

the affective mechanics by which this sense of participation is at once generated and carefully limited. And this takes us to our second point: the fact that these mechanics are themselves only made possible within a very specific socio-technical configuration. What Gilbert Simondon would call the "technical milieux" (Simondon, 1958) of broadcast television, the partially deregulated telecommunications network (the show's main source of profit is the charge to telephone voters) and a highly centralized entertainment industry, is a crucial feature of this particular ensemble of elements.

The sensuous specificity of television is clearly a key factor in understanding the effectivity of this relational complex. Without TV's unique capacity to combine a sense of domestic intimacy with various kinds of grand spectacle, then the peculiar intensity that viewers experience in watching what is, after all, a rather banal talent show would be wholly unachievable. At the same time, TV's capacity to render the viewer a wholly passive *spectator* (lacking the apparent immediacy of theater or the immersive quality of cinema) clearly heightens the sense of difference between the normality of the televisual experience and the "interactive" nature of the experience offered to viewers through the (again, objectively rather banal) mechanism of telephone voting. What is at stake here, then, are a set of differential intensities as much as a set of meanings or identities. Simondon (2005) is again a useful point of reference for us here. Drawing on his work, we could argue that what is taking place in this scenario cannot best be understood in terms of a logic of fantasy, identification, and psychic individuation, so much as in terms of a process of "collective individuation" whereby the affective and technocorporeal dynamics of the milieux are as crucial an element as any set of signifiers. The viewing subject is constituted here, individually and collectively, by a particular technical apparatus as much as by a set of signifiers. It is crucial here to be very clear that I am not proposing any kind of technological determinism: unlike, McLuhan or, arguably, Bernard Stiegler (2004), I do not propose that television *necessarily* renders its viewers as passive spectators; only that it affords a particular *capacity* to do so that is unique to it, and which must be taken account of in any proper analysis of the technical milieux in which it plays a role.

This is not to propose for a moment that the turn to a language of "technical milieux," "mixed semiotics," or "affect" would involve a turn away from the insights of the discourse analytic program. For example, suppose that we were to follow through this line of thinking for a while. What we would conclude, I think, is that the relational complex of neoliberalism – its "discourse" or "assemblage" – operates

through subsystems such as *The X Factor* partly by enabling a particular set of pleasures and momentary experiences of potency, which resonate harmoniously with other aspects of daily life in a neoliberal society that might otherwise be experienced as painful: its relentless insecurity, the lack of meaningful social bonds, the persistence of competition as the privileged form of social relation, the lack of input which most of its members have into the actual production of their own culture. This resonance is clearly effected at an affective rather than a semantic level.

At this point in the analysis, it becomes rather unclear as to whether or not this process could be understood very usefully in the terms offered by Laclau (2005). On the one hand, it might be suggested that each of these elements can be conceptualized as the basis for a potential *demand* that *The X Factor* helps to articulate to its own particular chain of equivalence (justice = meritocracy = selection of individuals by talent = democracy = plebiscitary selection from an approved list of candidates, and so on), ensuring that such demands do not become articulated to some more radical critique or project, thereby positing *The X Factor* as an important "nodal point" in the relational complex of neoliberalism. On the other hand, it would be crucial to observe that *The X Factor* only functions in this way to the extent that it helps those demands to *remain unexpressed*, rather than merely articulating them into a non-threatening chain. As such, the political operativity of *The X Factor* must be said to take place at the level of abstract potential: in other words – to follow Deleuze following Bergson – at the level of "the virtual" (Massumi, 2002). It functions in this way to ensure that specific political potentialities remain unactualized, and that the antagonistic frontier which defines populist discourse (and, therefore, arguably, politics as such), and which neoliberalism always risks opening between the elites that it so blatantly favors and the exploited majority which it does not, therefore *does not emerge*. As such, it would be difficult to understand *The X Factor*'s politics in straightforwardly Laclauian terms, insofar as these terms are taken to be those derived from Laclau's historic and recent analyses of populism and hegemony.

However, there is a strand which runs through Laclau's work, which rarely gets much attention from Laclau (let alone his readers) that is precisely concerned with the mechanics of this sort of phenomenon. In *On Populist Reason*, for example, Laclau identifies a category of political discourse which he contrasts directly with populism: "institutionalist" projects are those which, according to this schema, work to "make the limits of the discursive formation coincide with the limits of the community" (Laclau, 2005, p. 81). From this perspective, for example, the

strategy of New Labour and other "Third Way" neoliberal projects in the 1990s and 2000s – which promoted themselves as inclusive, and deliberately apolitical, managerial programs for social and economic modernization – can be understood as classically "institutionalist" endeavors, to be contrasted with the model populism of a Margaret Thatcher, which depended for its implementation of a neoliberal economic program upon the explicit hostile identification of a set of social political enemies on the Left, against whom she sought to mobilize her unlikely coalition of working-class social conservatives and entrepreneurial petit-bourgeois individualists (Finlayson, 2003; Hall, 1988).

From this perspective, *The X Factor* is clearly an element of a neoliberal assemblage which functions in an institutionalist rather than a populist mode. To flesh out this observation, and add something to our understanding of what is at stake in a dialogue between Laclau and Deleuze/Guattari, it is worth reflecting that in his seminal essay, *New reflections on the revolution of our times*, Laclau famously draws on Husserl's category of "sedimentation" to describe the "routinization and forgetting" (1990, p. 34) of the contingent nature of social formations, using a geological metaphor to identify a moment of solidification and relative stasis that every "institutionalism" must seek to engender. Much of Deleuze and Guattari's rhetoric in *A Thousand Plateaus* is conversely motivated by the observation that all matter, even at the geological level, is relatively dynamic, when viewed at the "molecular" scale. This difference in emphasis has a direct implication for our example, to the extent that it becomes important to note that the neutralization of potentially antagonistic demands to which *The X Factor* contributes must operate at the border between virtuality and actuality, at the level of affect rather than semantic discourse. The answer to our question as to the analytical utility of Laclau's thought in this context can only therefore be a qualified one: yes, it remains useful, but it is infinitely more illuminating when brought into dialogue with the "molecular" perspective of Deleuze and Guattari.

Having said this, it remains the case that Laclau describes institutionalist discourse in terms of its positing of some kind of coherent community, which raises the question of whether *The X Factor* actually does this, or whether it merely functions at a wholly pre-political level, as some kind of narcotic depoliticizing machine. In broad terms, we could answer this question by pointing to the fact that shows such as *The X Factor* do indeed evoke an imagined community of viewers, to some extent presenting themselves as the substitute for any more substantial form of national culture. More crucially, they offer themselves as visions

of a national culture which has at its heart not a determinate set of values, traditions, or aesthetic criteria, but instead an endless popularity contest. But here we perhaps reach a startling conclusion: for would we not have to acknowledge that *The X Factor* actually does exactly what much radical democratic theory claims any democratic community must do? It institutionalizes the emptiness at the center, replacing any determinate content with a ceaseless contestation: is that not precisely the basic form which radical democracy is assumed to take (Laclau, 1996; Mouffe, 2000)?

Radical democratic culture?

So is this, in fact, what democracy feels like: to watch and vote for contestants in *The X Factor*? No, of course not. But explaining exactly why not should get us some way toward answering the question with which we began: what might (radical) democracy feel like? There are several key issues. The first is that, quite obviously, voting in *The X Factor* makes no determinate difference to anything *except* the question of who wins *The X Factor*. But this itself tells us something important about the nature of democracy that much radical democratic theory tends to overlook. Radical democratic literature tends somewhat to fetishize the uncertainty and reversibility of democratic decisions (see, for example, Devenney, 2004; Mouffe, 1992), but it remains the case that, unless such decisions are in fact capable of having wide-ranging and irreversible effects, then they are of little value. As Aletta Norval has remarked, "since democracy contains the possibility of heightening the experience of contingency, the ethos of democracy is a disruptive and denaturalizing one. However . . . democracy also acts as the medium in which general purposes become crystallised and enacted" (Norval 2004, p. 160). Nothing of the kind is enabled by *The X Factor.* The second issue follows on from this first observation: there is no real pluralism at all to the culture that *The X Factor* presents as normative, as only contestants presenting an extremely narrow range of mainstream pop vocal styles are selected. The third follows on directly from the last two: despite the facsimile of democracy that is so central to their format, *The X Factor* and shows like it generally only concede a modicum of authority to the audience, restricting the power of initial selection and training of contestants to its cadre of "expert judges" (a perfect manifestation of the technocratic logic of neoliberal "post-democracy": see Crouch, 2004). So, overall, the experience that *The X Factor* invites the audience to enjoy, to experience as empowering and exciting, is one in which

there is no real chance of anything dangerous or new happening at all at the level of musical culture, and in which there is no real form of creative participation or lateral communication between members of the audience. Neither at the level of the collective decision, the level of real plurality, nor at the level of dispersed sovereignty do these potent manifestation of neoliberal culture make anything like radical democracy possible.

This raises the intriguing question of what genuinely democratic media/cultural forms might actually look and feel like. Here we cannot help but stray into speculative territory, but so be it. Let us reflect: what might media and cultural forms look like that would actually facilitate an experience of something like "democracy." One lucid answer to that question is that proposed by Claire Bishop in her widely cited essay on "Antagonism and relational aesthetics" (2004). In this essay, Bishop takes issue with the "democratic" claims for various kinds of "relational" art made by Bourriaud and his followers, following a reading of Laclau and Mouffe's work. Bishop points out that the kind of work advocated by Bourriaud, which tends to be site-specific work which aims to facilitate "encounters" between members of the public and (sometimes) artists, ultimately seems to legitimate itself according to a rather banal notion of interactive community as simply a good in itself, irrespective of the quality of the relationships facilitated. Many readers will be familiar with the kind of installation in which the viewer finds themselves, for example, eating food prepared by the artist and chatting to other viewers. Against this kind of work, Bishop champions artworks that seem to dramatize the inherently *antagonistic* dimension of social relations through provocative actions which supposedly illuminate the constitutive exclusions by which all communities are constituted: for example, in a piece which features a room full of individuals who have had their hair dyed blonde. The problem with Bishop's approach, illuminating as it is, is that while it certainly raises the stakes of the discussion, it presents a position that is surely vulnerable to just the same critique as Bourriaud's: what exactly is the point of a work of art which merely rehearses and illustrates a philosophical banality? If it is taken as read that all social relations are inherently antagonistic, then merely dramatizing and visualizing this fact makes no kind of intervention in the world, but only re-states a truism, just as surely as does "relational" art's perpetual re-staging of the fact that all social relations are relational.

There is very little space here to elaborate or fully justify an alternative to this position, but I would like briefly to sketch out what I think it would be. The first would be to state that a "radical democratic" cultural,

aesthetic, or media form would not merely dramatize the antagonistic and exclusionary nature of social relations, but also reflect the perpetual contingency of those social relations and the *potential for emancipation* inhering in their necessary tendency to dislocation. "Dislocation," which for Laclau (1990) haunts all social structures as their immanent tendency and their condition of possibility, is said by him to be the very form of freedom, and it is surely only in the experience of that freedom – an experience which is, of course, potentially terrifying (Laclau 1996, pp. 18–19) – that something like an experience of democracy is possible. At the same time, an often-overlooked, but nonetheless crucial aspect of Laclau's thought lies in his observation that democracy is not only the institutionalization of the empty place of sovereignty per se: it is also the institutionalization of a space wherein the very fact of undecidability both enables and compels *the decision* by which one social reality is constituted and another possibility is suppressed. As Norval makes clear, it is in this observation that "radical democracy" retains its identity as a theory of democracy as such rather than merely a celebration of pure pluralism, for if "democracy" has any meaning at all, it must always refer to some possibility of collective decision. Finally, I would posit that we can understand very little about the links between the ontological and normative dimensions of Laclau's thought if we do not understand that radical democracy is conceived as a politics which accepts the inevitability of, and seeks out the emancipatory potential of, the inherent *complexity* of social relations, whereas most utopian projects have been historically conceived as radical *simplifications* of the social space (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 150). This complexity is arguably indissociable from that radical impossibility of closure that defines the social as conceived by Laclau, Mouffe, and their followers; an impossibility which, after Marchart, we can simply name "the political" as such (Marchart, 2007, pp. 154–9).

If there are forms of cultural institution or media practice that have historically been able to instantiate, at affective and semantic levels, such an ideal of radical democracy, then I would suggest that they are to be found not amongst the authorized agencies of high culture, or among the commercial media, but amongst those "popular avant-gardes" that have sought to open up an experience of collectivity which is at once open-ended and potentially transformatory, in a deliberate attempt to make possible a new shared "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière, 2004). One might think of the assemblage of experimental jazz, black radicalism, and community politics in the late 1960s as one ideal-typical example (Moten, 2003). Compare this with the sense of bewildered amazement at

the sheer range of themes and production values, the often bizarre convergence of amateurism and dedication, which confronts the European viewer on their first encounter with the output of American public access television (Linder, 1999). Consider the emergence of arguably the most formally experimental musical genres of the last two decades (drum 'n' bass, grime, etc.) from the rhizomes of British "Pirate" Radio (Fuller, 2007; Goodman, 2010), or the extraordinary output of London's Resonance FM. On a much larger scale, it is surely more than technophilic optimism to observe that institutions such as Wikipedia, Myspace, Scribd.com, and so forth, have effected a radical decommodification of certain forms of knowledge and culture in recent times, even in the face of neoliberalism's attempt to penetrate ever more extensive regions of social life with capitalist social relations. Is it too much of a speculative generalization to suggest that almost all of these institutions tend toward not just the institutionalization of certain kinds of deliberative relations, but also the circulation of particular *affects* which combine, in a recognizable way, a sense of exhilaration and fear, of uncertainty, and social complexity experienced as a kind of joy which lacks all comfort?[4] This, I want to suggest, is what democracy feels like – a sensation existing between terror and exultation, involving a confrontation with the sheer inexhaustible potentiality inherent in the complexity of every social situation and the ultimate uncertainty which must attend every decision – and, as such, it is one of the ways in which we can recognize radical democratic media forms and cultural practices when we encounter them.

So, my conclusion does not ultimately propose to designate certain forms of media technology or cultural practice as inherently "democratic" or otherwise. Rather, my point is that the type of object about which we might be able to make any such judgment is not "the technology" or "the medium" or "the practice," but rather particular ensembles of practices ("assemblages," "discourses," "relational complexes") within which the specific material capacities of such elements would be one – but just one – element to be considered. Most importantly, I would like to inject a little passion and a little urgency into the normally rather dry discourse of "discourse theory," by suggesting that my line of argument demands that those practising it attend to the sensuous and affective specificities of such relational complexes in making their judgments and analyses. For is it not also the case that the affective properties that I have just attributed to certain experiences, which would normally be characterized as "aesthetic," are clearly recognizable as typical of moments of real democratic transformation or possibility? Is this not the very elation and anxiety that is routinely reported from the streets

of Paris in 1968, or of Prague in 1989, or of Manchester in 1945, and so forth? Is it not then important to appreciate that this – and not just the slow, deliberate grind of perpetual institutionalized disagreement – is what democracy feels like?

Notes

1. Marchart's discussion of the "politico-ontological difference" (2007, p. 157) between "the political" – understood as the general, self-differentiating ontological non-ground of all politics – and "politics" – understood as the ontic instances of actual political moments, interventions, decisions, and movement – is probably the most sophisticated discussion of this issue to date. As Marchart shows, there is a complex relationship between the political ontology developed by thinkers such as Laclau and the particular types of politics to which they might or might not be sympathetic: there is nothing in that ontology which guarantees or necessarily gives rise to an emancipatory democratic politics, but any politics which is to aspire to that condition must acknowledge both its lack of final ground, and the constitutive gap between that very lack and any possible forms of its institutionalisation. This helps to clarify some aspects of the problem considerably, but it nonetheless leaves just as open as ever the question of how we might recognise such emancipatory democratic projects when we encounter them at the *ontic* level, once we have accepted that they will necessarily be characterised by some particular kind of relation to the ontological fact of the groundlessness of the social.
2. This is not such a peculiar proposition as it might be, following the publication of a number of exploratory works in recent years charting the territory in between the political theory of Laclau & Mouffe and that of arguably the most important Anglophone political philosopher to have been directly influenced by Deleuze & Guattari, William Connolly: see Howarth (2008) as well as Tonder & Thomassen (2006).
3. The earliest reference I can remember to this aspect of the success of the *Big Brother* format was in an essay in the French newspaper *Libération* in 2001, but unfortunately I have not been able to locate the precise reference.
4. This "joy that lacks all comfort" could, of course, be theorized in post-Lacanian terms as a form of *jouissance* and/or an encounter with the Real – in fact I have used this terminology myself in some earlier work on music. But this is not the place for a full discussion of this theme.

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5

Ideology and Politics in the Popular Press: The Case of the 2009 UK MPs' Expenses Scandal[1]

Wei-yuan Chang and Jason Glynos

Exuberant rhetoric and stoked-up emotion are widely acknowledged to be key features of the popular press. However, there is disagreement about how best to understand and evaluate them. Some attribute to them a negative valence, viewing them as obstacles to rational debate and deliberation. Others attribute to them a necessary social function as sense-making devices that enable us to act in an increasingly complex world. And some attribute to them a potentially political role but are ambivalent as to its precise merits. Using the 2009 members of Parliament expenses scandal in the UK as our main empirical referent, and investigating how this was covered in three British national popular newspapers (*Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, and the *Sun*),[2] we deploy a psychoanalytically-inflected discourse theory to argue that an appeal to the categories of enjoyment and fantasy helps make more precise the ideological and political significance of emotive language in the popular press.

In developing this argument we are especially indebted to the work of Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and others linked to the Essex School of Discourse Theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 1990, 1996, 2005; Howarth, Norval & Stavrakakis, 2000; Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Norval, 2007; Stavrakakis, 1999). In forging a political theory of hegemony, this work treats discourse as an ontological horizon, in the sense that it affirms meaning as key to our understanding of human practices. Central to discourse theory's ontological horizon, however, are also the *limits* to discourse and meaning, focusing our attention on those moments of *dislocation* wherein meaning is interrupted or subverted. The resonances with the psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious are not difficult to discern here. In fact, Laclau is explicit in seeing the relationship between politics and the unconscious as converging around the logic of the signifier, "a logic of unevenness and dislocation . . . which presides over

the possibility/impossibility of the constitution of any identity" (Laclau 1990, pp. 93–6). A psychoanalytically-inflected discourse theory, therefore, would involve "the systematic study of these distortions," paying special attention to their affective and signifying traces (Laclau in Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2010, p. 239).

But if primacy is accorded to the political moment in discourse theory, this is because of the *critical* potential of affirming the discursive constitution of practices. There is nothing natural about how the MPs' expenses crisis is discursively constituted in the popular media. Meaning, power, struggle all play roles that need to be critically examined. In this chapter we explore how the categories of enjoyment and fantasy help us navigate the complex pathways linking the affective and symbolic dimensions of discourse, enabling us to better discern the political and ideological significance of the potent affective responses that the popular print media elicit and express. There are prima facie reasons therefore to be optimistic about the potential contribution of a psychoanalytically inflected discourse theory to the development of a critical media politics.

Understanding and evaluating popular press news reporting

We can discern at least two sorts of judgment on the question of politics in the popular press: (1) tabloids are anti-political; and (2) tabloids can be political but with ambivalent normative import.

Tabloid journalism has often been criticized for the harm it inflicts upon the political process because it does not perform the duties that news media are supposed to discharge in a liberal-democratic society: to inform the citizenry in a way that enables it to make educated decisions and engage in rational discussion about important issues that affect us all. In the British context, national newspapers have gradually been "popularized" or "tabloidized" from at least the 1930s, these terms ("popular" and "tabloid") denoting a clear rise in the number of human-interest and entertainment-oriented stories and a simultaneous decline in the number of serious, rational, and evidence-based news stories (Curran, Douglas, & Whannel, 1980; see also Lowenthal, 1961). As John Langer has pointed out, such "laments" abound in media research (1998, pp. 1–6). Bob Franklin (1997), for example, points to the popular media's rampant "infotainment," wherein public interest, measured judgement, and "serious" issues have been replaced by human-interest stories, sensationalism, and triviality. The underlying fear from a political point of view concerns the health of democracy because tabloidized journalism

undermines rational and critical public debate, which is considered essential for a robust liberal democracy (see, for example, Habermas, 1989).

Some scholars, however, do not erect an external (rationalist) ideal against which to judge the popular press. These scholars are more "immanentist" in their orientation, treating popular press as a cultural discourse with its own characteristics, distinct from the broadsheet press for example (Bird 1992; Conboy, 2002, 2006; Connell, 1992; Dahlgren, 1992; Gripsrud, 1992, 2000; Langer, 1998; Macdonald, 2000; Sparks, 1992, 2000; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2008). In this view, the popular press draws on "the 'popular' traditions of entertainment and consumption, rather than attempting to provide a single, bourgeois form of rational debate" (Conboy, 2006, p. 212). As Ian Connell has pointed out, to criticize popular journalism as politically harmful because it cannot fulfill the role attributed to, and discharged by, the broadsheets, is "almost like comparing cartoon strips with essays on the globalisation of economic affairs, and regretting the former is not like the latter" (Connell, 1998, p. 12).

Scholars who adopt this cultural-discursive approach make two key observations. First, the popular press functions as an important sense-making and normatively binding device because it constructs social and moral pictures that help subjects orient themselves in today's complex world. Heightened personalization and emotivist tendencies only serve to enhance its sense-making and norm-binding functions. Second, however, the popular press, precisely because it has these functions, contains political potential because it can be very effective in mobilizing people's energy along political pathways (Conboy, 2002, 2006; Connell, 1992; Gripsrud, 2000; Jones, 2005; Macdonald, 2000; Ornebring & Jonsson, 2004; Tulloch, 2007; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2008; Zoonen, 2005). The emphasis on the political *potential* marks a hesitation here because it is generally acknowledged in these circles that the popular press may provoke people's concerns for social and political issues without necessarily producing a project for change. As Martin Conboy has pointed out, "tabloids do not have enough space to develop the sorts of consistency of coverage which might add up to a radical take on the world . . . Most of the time the tabloid use a language which exploits the sentiments of a British underclass . . . [H]owever, they do demonstrate that there is nothing intrinsic in the tabloid format to prevent it being used for radical interventions in public debates" (Conboy, 2006, p. 174). There is another more obvious reason for this hesitation in characterizing the potential residing in the energy of the popular press as political: the emotions stoked up are often considered normatively suspect, relying, for example, on racist and sexist mores. The hesitation expressed by cultural discourse scholars regarding the political

significance of the tabloid press means that the most we can say is that the popular press has "exceptional . . . ability to mobilize affective involvement" (Dahlgren, 1995, p. 59; see also Macdonald, 2000, p. 254). Yet how these discursive tactics "are used is another question . . . [for t]hey may potentially mobilize fear, hatred and subordination just as readily as they may induce reflection, empathy, solidarity and critique" (Dahlgren, 1995, p. 59).

We think that both the "anti-political" and "political potential" stances outlined above rest on valid intuitions, but that these intuitions can be productively expressed using an analytical framework that draws on a psychoanalytically-inflected discourse theory (Laclau, 1990, 1996, 2005; Glynos & Howarth, 2007). We agree that the popular press tends to make it difficult to debate important social and political issues. However, we disagree that this is a difficulty that should be understood or remedied predominantly as a function of rationality, knowledge, or transparency. This is a critical point emphasized repeatedly in the work of Ernesto Laclau, most pertinently in his *On Populist Reason* (Laclau, 2005). To give the populist tendencies of the popular press a concrete content, defined in relation to (the subversion of) rationality, knowledge, and transparency, would be to construe in overly narrow terms not only the role of popular media as primarily information transmitters, but also the very concept of the political as a function of rational discussion and debate. We also agree with those who appreciate the social and symbolic function of the popular press, including the affective energy that can be harnessed in a variety of ways, including political pathways. However, we think that the ambivalence expressed by advocates of this approach is a result of an under-theorization of – or simply lack of clarity about – the very notion of the political. We argue that popular press stories do have political significance, but that this significance can be better appreciated by turning to the psychoanalytic categories of enjoyment and fantasy. This "turn" will enable us to draw a distinction between the political and ideological dimensions of the popular press (see also Glynos, 2008a), a distinction that can be used to elucidate the manner in which the popular press constitutes the terrain of debate in ways that cannot be adequately described as simply anti-rationalist, even if we insist on its predominantly ideological character, and that can be understood as normatively progressive *or* regressive.

MPs' expense claims: A problem of moral corruption

One of the UK's most prominent political events of 2009 was the MPs' expenses scandal. Linked to a long-running legal challenge brought under

the Freedom of Information Act, the scandal followed detailed revelations about what MPs claimed on taxpayer-funded expense allowance schemes – claims ranging all the way from bath plugs to second home renovations and mortgage installments. Release of this information was controlled by the *Daily Telegraph*, the newspaper that purchased this information from John Wick (the "whistle-blower"). This release of information began in May 2009 and was quickly taken up and given its own spin by the popular press. But it is worth noting that the expense claims stories had already hit the news earlier in the year, the Home Secretary Jacqui Smith eventually becoming one of the most high-profile casualties. Arriving on the coat tails of the 2007–8 financial crisis and the loss of trust this occasioned in the UK's financial institutions and regulatory regime, the MPs' expenses scandal became a lightning rod for people's growing frustration with the economic and political system, signaling for many a new nadir in the public's trust toward institutions as such.

It would be difficult to overestimate the outrage expressed by members of the public over the MPs' expenses scandal. Moreover, the UK's print media has had a very big role to play in defining and constituting this outrage, even though related stories were widely disseminated and iterated in a variety of other media outlets, ranging from TV and radio, to Internet blogs and YouTube. Our interest in this case centers on the question of how we should characterize and understand the way popular newsprint media have constructed this outrage, thereby bringing it into existence as a particular type of outrage, and to explore how a psychoanalytically-informed discourse theory can contribute critically to such an inquiry.

The following quotations capture some of the flavour and tone of the 2009 reports in the popular press:

> What a disgrace! Our prisons are full of people who have "stolen" far less than that! (*Daily Mirror*, January 21)

> Propriety? Dignity of office? Forget it . . . Jackboot Jacqui, she doesn't know the meaning of the word 'morality' . . . (*Daily Mail*, February 10)

It has been suggested that scandal has a unique power in a mediatized political context, in the sense that it can function – as if all by itself – as a moral anchor in our contemporary age, provoking and sustaining massive moral indignation on account of its apparent lack of ambiguity (Lull & Hinerman, 1997). And we think it is clear from the above

extracts that, from the very outset, the MPs' expenses scandal was constructed as a (widely shared) problem of moral corruption in British politics, in which guilty MPs were targeted as personally and morally culpable, and ridiculed and shamed whenever and wherever possible for their hypocritical actions. In this view, even if MPs were acting strictly within the law, this did not absolve them in any way from their *moral* crimes.

The way in which this story is reported in the popular press illustrates clearly what media scholars claim is a prominent feature of the popular press, namely the use of rhetoric to provoke a highly charged emotional response. As we noted earlier, popular journalism possesses an "exceptional . . . ability to mobilize affective involvement" (Dahlgren, 1995, p. 59). For example, in order to sharpen the emotional response of shock and horror, the MPs' scandal is described as "a truly obscene episode in the history of Britain's political system" (Peter Oborne, *Daily Mail*, September 26). Or elsewhere we find writers constructing chains of equivalence with well-known bogey figures in domains of sex and crime, in order to heighten the morally culpable and corrupt nature of MPs' behaviour: the Mafia (*Sun*, January 21), benefit fraudsters (*Daily Mirror*, April 1), gypsies (*Sun*, 26 May), and so on.

These sorts of rhetorical figures and techniques are deployed in a variety of ways, but by far the most frequently elicited and loudly expressed response to the problem of moral corruption in all three popular papers involved feelings of outrage, accompanied by shrill demands for punishment.

Rage and the demand for punishment

Feelings of rage can be understood using the psychoanalytic notion of "theft of enjoyment." This is because – according to Lacanian psychoanalysis – our sense of being is procured, to a large extent, by imagining how another being (an Other) enjoys. In other words, the Other and the Other's enjoyment function as key reference points in establishing the parameters of our *own* enjoyment. And insofar as the Other's enjoyment is premised on the subtraction by the Other of our own "rightful" enjoyment, this tends to generate a powerful affective response.

Writers make frequent use of provocative language in their stories, as well as exaggeration, to prompt calls for revenge and punishment. In fact, several rhetorical techniques can be identified that seek to further ratchet up the emotional charge of the readers' response. But it is worth noting that at least two elements are crucial in the production of rage. First, it is necessary to attribute enjoyment to another figure, in this

case the figure of the morally corrupt MP. Second, and most crucially, however, this enjoyment must be seen to be enjoyed *at our expense*.

The first element – the idea that the Other enjoys – is clearly present in the reports. One of the most common techniques deployed to fan and sustain outrage is to flood paper editions with endless lists of itemized expense claims, ranging from the smallest to the largest and most extravagant, and from the most mundane to the most bizarre: paperclips, toilet rolls, second home mortgage payments, duck-house installations, and so on (see, for example, the *Daily Mirror*, May 17 & June 19, or *Daily Mail*, May 12). And in order to reinforce the sense of their enjoyment, MPs are also drawn into chains of equivalence with other well-known figures living the "high life," such as bankers: "Bankers and MPs are united in greed" (Title appearing in *Sun*, February 10).

Itemized lists of MPs' expense claims, as well as drawing them into equivalential chains with others' extravagances, reveal a life of luxury and decadence. MPs are clearly enjoying themselves! However, crucial to the stoking up of rage is the additional idea that MPs are enjoying *at our expense*. It is troubling enough when the Other enjoys when we are not. When one adds the further ingredient that the Other's enjoyment comes at our expense – that we have become the instruments of the Other's enjoyment, forcing us into what Lacanians consider to be the position of the pervert – it is enough to throw us into a blind rage that disturbs any sense of proportion, consistency, and composure. Lacanians capture this idea with the notion of "theft of enjoyment."

MPs are castigated and heckled because they make huge expense claims (for example, for renovating or for paying the mortgage on second homes). But they are also castigated and heckled because they make tiny expense claims (for a paperclip or a stamp). There is no proper measure when MPs are clearly seen as having "stolen" what is rightfully ours. The theme of "stolen enjoyment" or "theft of enjoyment" is perhaps one of the most widespread and iterated themes in the reports surrounding the MPs' expenses scandal (but not just the MPs' expenses scandal!):

> While most of us will be lucky to afford a summer holiday this year, one MP is looking forward to relaxing in the hot tub he's installed in his garden – at your expense. (MILKING IT? MPS ARE BLEEDING US ALL DRY, *Daily Mirror*, May 10)

Another popular technique that tends to reinforce the idea that MPs' enjoyment comes at our expense involves contrasting the luxury of

MPs' lifestyles with the struggles of those battling the effects of recession. One headline captures this well:

> RECESSION? NOT IF YOU'RE AT THE STATE TROUGH (*Daily Mail*, March 15)

Such stoked-up rage can be channeled into endless expressions lamenting the predicament we find ourselves in, fueling loud calls for revenge:

> Remember what happened to Romanian president Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife Elena in 1989 when they were caught fleeing for the border with bags of money. Bang, bang, game over (MPs HAVE LOST THEIR HONOUR *Sun*, April 9)

From expressions of rage to determinate action

As we pointed out earlier, many media researchers have noted that the affective abundance of the popular press does not necessarily entail or translate into passivity or political apathy. Stoked-up images of revenge premised upon a "theft of enjoyment" do not necessarily have to remain fixated upon rage and the calls for punishment this makes possible. They can also be pressed into the service of public action to bring about concrete results, which is precisely what the popular press sought to promote on a number of occasions in the MPs' expenses case. For example, the *Daily Mail* (see June 1) ran a successful campaign to raise funds to explore the possibility of bringing private law suits against guilty MPs; and the *Sun* (see May 19) led a campaign to collect signatures for a petition calling for the dissolution of Parliament and an early general election. Moreover – on account of the high volume of expense claim data made public over a short period of time – papers in the UK actively enlisted the help of readers to scrutinize the expense claims of their local MPs and report back to them.

Given such mobilization of public support, we can understand the ambivalence felt by media researchers who see some political potential in popular press reporting. The response generated by the papers through the above-described campaigns is clearly not a passive one. In this sense, popular press stories *can* contribute to some form of political mobilization. It does not follow, however, that we can attribute to this mobilization a positive valence on the simple basis that it is an active response. The picture is more complex, forcing us to ask how we can or should evaluate such active engagements. Our claim here is that a turn

to fantasy, in conjunction with a clearer specification of the notion of the political, is crucial to the advancement of this inquiry.

The turn to fantasy: Enjoyment and the flight from radical contingency

We have suggested that the emotional charge linked to the MPs' expenses scandal can be understood with reference to the Lacanian concepts of "enjoyment" and "theft of enjoyment." We also saw how this emotional charge can readily be channeled into concrete action. We could say that this enjoyment supports, and is supported by, the articulation of the MPs' expenses scandal as a problem of moral corruption; and that this combination of emotional charge (rage) and signifier (moral corruption) comprises what in psychoanalytic terms we could call a *symptom*.

We argue that we can deepen our analysis further by appealing to the category of fantasy. This is because, from a psychoanalytic point of view, the character and interpretation of a symptom ought to be understood in relation to an underlying fantasmatic frame (see, for example, Žižek, 1989, pp. 71–5, 124–8). More specifically, the character and charge of the emotion at stake can be better understood when linked to the specific features making up the subject's underlying fantasy and the way the subject is invested in it. For example, the greater the investment a subject makes in the fantasy of marital harmony, the more likely is the threat of its disruption and associated "thefts of enjoyment" through illicit love affairs, mean-spirited in-laws, and the like (cf. Glynos, 2008b).

It is not easy to tease out the relation between emotion, affect, enjoyment, and fantasy. Taking affect to represent a quantum of libidinal energy, we could say in a first approach that emotion results from the way it gets caught up in a network of signifiers (see also Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008). The meaning and significance of emotions, according to Lacan, is a function not of their intrinsic properties, but rather of the subject's universe of meaning and the way that this is structured by fantasy. He warns against the temptation to impute to emotions an essence and autonomy they do not possess, or to attribute to them an ability to communicate their significance to us without the mediation of signifying frames. Instead, he suggests a kind of methodological postulate which we could put in the form of the injunction, "Follow the signifier!," implying that we pay special attention to the "letter" of what is said through multiple displacements of affect. This suggests that a key aspect of understanding the significance of emotions in the organization of social practices involves trying to map them in relation to the underlying fantasies which organize a subject's enjoyment.

However, we argue that the turn to fantasy is important not only from the point of view of making sense of enjoyment and its various emotional vicissitudes (rage and, as we will see later, cynical contempt and betrayal). It is also important in helping us to grasp the political and ideological implications of our emotional investment in a narrative (Glynos, 2001). In addition, we believe that a turn to fantasy can help us specify the parameters of the ambivalence expressed by media research scholars regarding the political potential of the popular press. Indeed, the political and ideological significance of fantasy can be seen in terms of both its content and the strength of our attachment to it (see also Glynos, 2008a).

First, the *content* of fantasy. This is understood to be made up of signifiers associated with the emotional charge of a subject's stance, in this case, rage. As we noted above, it is a staple of Lacanian psychoanalysis that emotions can deceive and that analysts must track the signifying pathways in trying to "analyse" emotion, and that this is accomplished by paying close attention to the way signifiers enter into relations of equivalence and difference. We can get at the content of fantasy by exploring, for example, its ideals, the obstacles to achieving such ideals, the way challenges can be overcome, the vision of a successful outcome, and the imagined consequences of failure. Constructing the fantasy in this way has clear political implications because the identity of key players and visions in the fantasmatic narrative corresponds only to a subset of possible visions or ideals, thereby structuring and delimiting our ideas about which social norms are worthy of public contestation and how they should be revised.

Second, the *way* a subject is invested in fantasy – the strength of a subject's attachment to a particular fantasy – has clear ideological implications. This is because the more reality appears to diverge from the fantasmatic script, the more threatening this reality appears to become. The ideological aspect of fantasy, however, has less to do with the idea that fantasy diverges from some "consensus reality," nor even that it *structures* reality. It has more to do, rather, with the idea of covering over the possibility of other potential realities by reference to an underlying guarantee – in other words, of fleeing the contingency of social relations.

Elements of fantasy

Fantasy, then, offers us a way to flee contingency, but, in doing so, it offers a symbolic frame within which to define the parameters of our enjoyment. Relating this now to our case we note that there is a fairly

clear picture of an ideal animating the construction of MPs' expenses scandal as a problem of moral corruption. Cutting across all the popular press outlets we canvassed, this ideal expresses itself as a country of honor and integrity defined by the purity and time-honored reputation of its parliamentary system:

> BRITISH public life has, for the past 200 years, been founded on the single commanding idea of integrity. This essential notion that members of the ruling elite are fundamentally honest and decent has been crucial to our political stability . . . (Peter Oborne, *Daily Mail*, May 16)

Repeated invocation of this lost (or dislocated) ideal is important because stories invariably portray the MPs' expenses scandal in a way that stirs anxiety in relation to this ideal, usually articulated in terms of a threat or fear. It is this anxiety that, potentially, can be mobilized in the service of a particular aim, normative vision, and solution. The production of anxiety through the specter of a threat is clear from the following: "DISSOLVE THIS ROTTEN PARLIAMENT BEFORE IT CORRUPTS PUBLIC LIFE ALTOGETHER" (*Daily Mail*, May 10); and: "we cannot allow the corruption to continue in what is meant to be the Mother of all Parliaments" (*Daily Mirror*, March 31).

This dislocation of British political life and its idealized democratic legacy has also disturbed the British subject's capacity to "enjoy its nation," eliciting the paradigm response "this is not the Britain I know!," and expressing the worry that this whole affair threatens to descend into ridicule and farce : "What a joke this country has become!" (*Daily Mirror*, December 15); we have become "the laughing stock of the world," with France dubbing Britain the "United Condom" (*Daily Mail*, April 1). And the affective investment and anxiety linked to the threat of this fantasmatic ideal was amplified through a range of rhetorical techniques, for example by highlighting its historically exceptional nature. Referring to the UK's parliamentary regime at the time of the crisis, the historian Correlli Barnett was quoted as authority for the claim that "THIS IS ONE OF THE MOST DISHONEST AND INCOMPETENT REGIMES OF MODERN TIMES" (title in *Daily Mail*, 20 June).

These sorts of claims, then, all converge on the central notion of a nostalgic past defined by a pure ideal of political honor and moral integrity, with the implication that this ideal needs to be recovered. In this narrative, our past embodies an unblemished ideal, and the present dislocates this ideal.

On the political and ideological significance of fantasy

So far, we have offered a fairly abstract signifying frame with which to structure our understanding of the way the MPs' expenses row has been played out in the popular newsprint media. We have suggested that the key phrase (or "master signifier") structuring this discursive field, "moral corruption in British politics," was underpinned by the fantasmatic ideal of Britain's pure and noble parliamentary past, and that this was sustained by enjoyment (as "theft of enjoyment").

This analysis may help us begin to understand the *grip* over the subject of the problem of MPs' expenses scandal formulated as a problem of moral decay and corruption. However, it is not yet clear how to understand the precise *political* and *ideological* implications of such an analysis. In other words, from our relatively abstract account thus far nothing necessarily follows to explain how we should understand the causes of, or solutions to, the problem of moral corruption and the threat this poses to the ideal of our parliamentary democracy. We need now, therefore, to extend our investigation in order to ascertain what these are, and to better appreciate how they are connected to our previous analysis.

Extending our analysis involves clarifying what we mean by the concept of the political. In our discussion of the media studies literature regarding the political significance of tabloidization, we suggested that one reason for many scholars' ambivalence regarding this issue was linked to a certain lack of conceptual precision. Accordingly, we shall take the concept of "the political" here to aim at the contestability of existing power relations and we shall take the concept of ideology to signal the concealment of the contingency linked to this contestability.

We can begin to develop these ideas further by distinguishing between two aspects of the political. First, the political *moment* for us captures the registration of the simple idea that things need not be the way they are, that they could be different, and that the social order is a product of context-dependent and tension-ridden hegemonic struggles that are not subject to an underlying law (see, for example, Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 1990). Second, the political *dimension* of social relations speaks to the idea of publicly contesting a norm in the name of an ideal (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). Such public contestation, then, enables and facilitates a process of mobilization in which an existing regime can be reformed or maintained. But not all forms of political contestation can maintain the visibility of contingency and thus keep alive the political moment. Our notion of ideology signals the way political contestation and mobilization can often proceed without affirming the radical

contingency of social relations or acknowledging the anxiety associated with this.

This brings us to the importance of fantasy in the production of emotion and political mobilization. As we have seen above, as a dislocatory event, the MPs' expenses scandal appears to touch upon an anxiety among British people concerning the health of public life, expressed in terms of a dislocation of Britain's national democratic legacy. Teasing out and analysing the fantasies in this emotionally charged field is crucial in understanding and assessing the political and ideological significance of the popular press stories about the moral corruption of MPs.

As we noted earlier, a key aspect of the logic of fantasy is the sense of guarantee that it offers the subject. This guarantee is important because it serves to structure desire in a way that keeps anxiety at bay, thereby hooking the subject into its logic. We can illustrate this by appealing to at least two distinct ideas that take on the role of guarantor and where responsibility for our situation is rightly understood to reside: (1) self-sufficiency, and (2) the caring Other. This difference in the ideas of the guarantor is crucial to an appreciation of the nuanced differences between fantasies and thus the sorts of political projects that are supported by the enjoyment structured by those fantasies. Taking our cue from the nature of the guarantors identified above, we characterize these fantasies as "fantasies of self-sufficiency" and "paternalist fantasies," respectively.[3]

In what follows we would like to suggest that differences between fantasies do translate into differences in our response to the MPs' expenses beyond simple, albeit loud, expressions of rage and calls to punishment supported by the specter of thefts of enjoyment. And these differences find expression not only in the character of our affective responses, but also in the normative visions they prompt. We look at each of these fantasies in turn. (In this chapter we do not give detailed consideration to the differences in nuance across the three popular newspapers under investigation, nor how or why these fantasies might get differentially distributed among them.)

Fantasies of self-sufficiency and paternalism

The more the self-sufficient self *qua* individual private citizen is invested with rightful responsibility for our situation, the more likely it will be that we will feel a sense of smug condescension vis-à-vis the MPs' expenses scandal, implying that this sort of event was entirely expected:

> We haven't just found out. It's been known for years. What we've finally got is the grubby detail. (*Daily Mail*, June 1)

Fantasies of self-sufficiency attribute to the individual, rather than society, primary responsibility for his or her fortunes: our political community is an association of self-sufficient subjects held together by shared, albeit individualized, moral codes. In this picture, the blame is entirely upon MPs' individual "choices" to break the moral codes that play an essential role in binding the community. Although the MPs, the rulers, have been blamed, this blame is made from a fantasmatic horizon in which MPs ought to be treated in the same way as the average citizen, as a self-sufficient self: "Thousands of Londoners travel to work every day, why shouldn't their MPs?" (*Daily Mirror*, March 24).

By "following the signifier" linked to what appears to be an opaque and fixed emotion (rage), we find a specific fantasmatic frame that supports it and gives it its meaning. Viewed from the point of view of a fantasy of self-sufficiency, we can understand that rage to be a product of a cynical attitude about the value of the state apparatus, specifically the role of Westminster. Rage and calls for punishment are informed less by a sense of betrayal than by cynicism. Given the content of this fantasy, it is reasonable to suppose that solutions to the problem of moral corruption would move in the direction of a smaller state and public sector generally, as well as lower taxes. In this picture, the morally corrupt MP is construed as an obstacle to a more robust individual self-sufficiency – as applied to both MPs' themselves as well as individual private citizens, who have come to depend too much on the state for their own welfare.

Another salient fantasy type can be discerned when one posits as guarantor not the individual him or herself, but a "caring Other." This produces what we call paternalist fantasies. From this point of view the cause of moral corruption is traced to a fairly blatant and crass dereliction of public duty by office holders to care for us as private citizens. This, of course, is in clear contrast to those who subscribe to fantasies of individual self-sufficiency and who consequently would be keener to augment individual responsibility rather than expect Others to devote themselves to caring for us. In a paternalist fantasy, the role of caretaker is often attributed to the state and to the government – a role that demands that public officials understand what our needs are and who can then meet those needs:

> In fiddling their expenses Labour MPs . . . . abandon what moral high ground [they had and] . . . betray working people who depend on a Labour Government for employment rights, tax credits, pensions and services like health, education and housing. [MPs] don't need to

> wear hairshirts or live in a hole in the road under tarpaulin. But they must start to think about more than their wallets and look after voters instead of their own bank balances. (*Daily Mirror*, April 1)

We have claimed that by "following the signifier" we can discern the contours of particular fantasies that help us to achieve a more nuanced understanding of our affective and political responses to the problem of moral corruption MPs appear to embody. The above excerpts reveal how appealing to different fantasies allows us to differentiate between at least two affective inflections of rage. From the point of view of self-sufficiency, rage is a little more straightforward because there is no significant investment in the political class as guarantor. Consequently rage and accompanying calls for punishment are expressed in terms of a cynical "I told you so." By contrast, from the point of view of a subject invested in a paternalist fantasy, rage is more complicated because there is a much stronger identification with the office holders. In this view we identify with the political class in a way that is analogous to our identification with a parental figure. We invest that figure with a greater degree of trust, rendering us more dependent on their good and honorable intentions. In the case of the paternalist fantasy, then, we would expect rage to be inflected much more strongly with a sense of betrayal than would be the case in the corresponding fantasy of self-sufficiency. When structured by a paternalist fantasy, the rage we feel toward MPs is more like the rage we would express toward a parent who has let us down.

Moreover, the sense of outrage directed at MPs often appears somewhat disproportionate, an observation which may find some explanatory traction in the hypothesis that rage is directed not only at MPs but also – unconsciously – at ourselves. This might make sense from the point of view of someone who supports a strong and caring state but who, at a deeper level, has identified with ideals of self-sufficiency. In this view, the flames of rage directed at MPs are not simply an expression of the betrayal of trust, but also a displaced form of guilt associated with ceding some autonomy to our desire to be taken care of.

But if an appeal to fantasy – specifically the figure of the guarantor – helps us to better understand the emotional tenor of our affective response, it also offers hints about the sorts of normative visions and political pathways it makes possible. For example, although paternalist fantasies can certainly support calls for re-election and punishment, they can also serve to support normative visions distinct from those emerging out of a self-sufficiency framework. Rather than pointing to the elimination or reduction of state functions as a self-sufficiency

fantasy might, a paternalist framework may point to their reform or amplification:

> With the world economy on its knees, two million unemployed all set to become three million over the next year, and with every high street in the land looking increasingly like a ghost town, it is good to know that Gordon Brown is thinking . . . [that] our first priority . . . is jobs and it's homes and it's businesses. . . . Fair enough. But keeping our faith in the democratic process is also part of his job. Stemming the public's absolute revulsion at MPs who bend the rules to feather their own nests is Gordon's job, too. (*Daily Mirror*, April 11)

There is a clear sense that this extract – when read through the prism of a paternalist fantasy – can be understood in terms of a demand not simply for the restoration of trust, but a restoration of trust *in order to restore our faith in the caring state as guarantor*. As one perceptive commentator notes, "[w]e rage and storm about Westminster peccadilloes because, deep down, we want to look up to our MPs" (*Daily Mail*, May 31).

Radical democratic possibilities

What both self-sufficiency and paternalist fantasies have in common is a reference to a "guarantor": the individual self or the caring Other, respectively. Moreover, the guarantor's concrete identity tends to set in motion a kind of normative momentum, pointing to the sorts of entities that qualify as obstacles to the realization of ideals associated with those guarantors, thereby also hinting at possible solutions to the problem of moral corruption (individual MPs, parliamentary rules, the remuneration regime, the state as a whole, the culture of dependency, the culture of selfish individualism, and so on).

Our focus in this chapter has been on the popular press and the fantasies we can discern in them in relation to the MPs' expenses crisis. But we should note here that the implications of such analysis are not restricted in scope to the popular press. Such fantasies, we suggest, structure stories in the media at large, enabling us to pose more general questions about what alternative normative and ethical possibilities are made visible in the wake of such fantasmatic analyses.

Consider our earlier claim that a reference to some sort of guarantee is a key component of the logic of fantasy. The guarantor is the agent to which the subject attributes ultimate responsibility for his or her fate. What would happen, then, if the guarantor's concrete identity also entailed a simultaneous and paradoxical questioning of its status

as guarantor? For us this opens up the possibility of a radical democratic subjectivity. Beyond the self and the Other is another possibility, namely, one where responsibility for our fate is situated at the level of *ourselves* as a *collective and democratic subject*.

In qualifying this possibility as radically democratic, we try to capture something about the mode of our engagement with fantasies, not so much with their content. It speaks to what has elsewhere been referred to as the ethical dimension of a practice (see, for example, Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Glynos, 2003, 2008a). The central point here is that a radical democratic mode of engagement signals a sense of unease and incompleteness in our own selves as collective beings. Here, responsibility resides in ourselves as a collective and democratic self that is understood as constitutively lacking and thus always open to change, reform, or revolution. If responsibility is not located outside ourselves, nor inside ourselves, perhaps the demonization of others or our self becomes less automatic or likely.

This mode of fantasmatic attachment does not find any proper or full expression in the popular press. And given its history and tenor this is unsurprising, but nor is it inevitable, and neither should it be seen as symptomatic of only the popular press. For example, when positing the MPs' expenses scandal as a matter of collective responsibility, the wider social context and historical contingency of the MPs' expenses system might be acknowledged more directly, thereby making it possible to discuss reform in non-reactionary terms. Swimming against admittedly powerful currents of cynicism and closure, we can only point to splashes of such hints in the popular press. As one person puts it: "as power drains away from . . . [MPs], it doesn't automatically trickle down to us. . . . Disdain for Parliament must be channeled into exciting new alternatives" (*Daily Mail*, May 17).

Such alternatives may come into view when the problem is seen to reside not so much in our MPs, the state or indeed our selves, but rather in the "get rich" culture we take part in and sustain. Or we might open up the possibility of viewing the British democratic legacy, that hallowed ideal animating the fundamental fantasy of the MPs' expenses scandal, in a more critical manner, by putting into question the purity of the ideal (for example, by showing how such dishonourable behavior by MPs is nothing new), or by putting the scale of the MPs' expenses scandal into context (for example, by showing how it pales in comparison with private financial scandals).

Another effort to mobilize the dislocation wrought by the scandal in a different equivalential direction has involved the attempt to articulate it

with the Iraq War: "[F]aith in politicians was eroded by the Iraq invasion, and fell off a cliff over MPs' expenses" (*Daily Mirror*, June 16). "[D]oesn't the scandal over MPs' expenses leave a question mark over our own democratic system? Is this what our soldiers are dying for?" (*Daily Mirror*, July 13). Through an appeal to the Iraq War, the issue of moral corruption, although linked directly to MPs, becomes articulated in a way that raises broader issues, putting into question the purity of British democracy by contextualizing the scandal in a more recent historical context. It implies that problems with our democratic system are not new, that our British legacy is not pure, and that it has always been subject to contestation and reform.

In these brief extracts we can discern what are, admittedly, only remote hints of a political moment that puts into question the ideal of a pristine British political legacy prior to the "fall" embodied by the MPs' expenses scandal. Perhaps this articulation comes across as a little forced given the weight of closure that characterizes the typical news story in the popular press. We nevertheless press these gestures in the service of (making visible) a radical democratic possibility – one that would reveal itself as a call from, and promise of, this incomplete and inconsistent inheritance (Norval, 2007, pp. 145–52). What it says is that "another future is possible, that there is more to democracy than what is called democracy today" (p. 147). This "democracy to come," this inheritance of democracy that calls us from the future with all its urgency, "takes into account the absolute and intrinsic historicity of the only system that welcomes in itself, in its very concept . . . the right to self-critique and perfectibility" (Derrida in Norval, 2007, p. 148). In other words, the British legacy of democracy dies at the exact moment when we think we have, or once had, it. It lives on when we affirm our collective responsibility in shaping it as we carry it forward.

Conclusion

Tabloidized news stories are not an innocuous bit of fun. But nor are they, in some simple sense, "evil" because they conceal or deliberately misinform us about "real" issues. Actually, they are crucial because they construct the terrain in which debates and discussion take place about issues that we consider important. More specifically, they actively sow the seeds of the "regime of truth" within which arguments and policy recommendations can be rejected or deemed acceptable and persuasive. It is against this background that a psychoanalytically inflected discourse theory can be seen to contribute to the development of a critical media politics.

Hay and Stoker (2009) locate the source of general political disaffection and disengagement not in the absence of various aggregative and deliberative mechanisms with which to re-engage British citizens politically, but more fundamentally in a deeply entrenched anti-political culture shared by citizens and politicians alike, and reinforced by the media, among other fora. Of course, the media need not be seen in exclusively negative terms. As we noted at the outset of our chapter, many scholars also discern positive political potential residing in the popular print media. But if the phrase "mediatized politics" (Hajer, 2009) accurately signals the contemporary blurring of the mediatic and political aspects of news stories, it becomes increasingly important to rethink the notion of normative and ideological critique in a way that is sensitive to this context.

Following the dominant view in media studies, we acknowledge in this chapter that the interpellative power of popular press news stories – in this case MPs' expenses stories – derives primarily from an often-exaggerated sense of urgency and emotivism – the outrage linked in the specific instance to the widespread moral corruption of the political class. However, in "following the signifier," we have tried to deepen our understanding of this observation by showing how affect is structured, and that the character and significance of an emotive response cannot be derived in any straightforward way from the dislocation occasioned by the disruption of expectations. Discursive work is needed to constitute the terrain of grievance and debate. And explaining the power stories have to grip subjects involves identifying the underlying fantasies that writers assume readers share or invite them to share.

Reconstructing fantasies in this way allows us to then posit them as having a key role in explaining the *grip* of certain solutions to problematized phenomena, including their continued hegemonic status. Beyond the comparatively huge circulation figures the popular print media enjoy in the UK, fantasies furnish us with a way to account for why particular narrative articulations gain purchase whereas others do not. Writers invariably portray the MPs' expenses scandal in a way that disturbs a fantasmatic ideal – in this case a lost ideal of moral, British parliamentary purity – bringing anxiety to the fore, usually articulated in terms of a threat or fear.

We have suggested that the ways worries and anxieties are expressed rhetorically offer us clues regarding the fantasies of self-sufficiency and paternalism underpinning particular solutions to the problem of moral corruption. Yet in the very positing of such fantasies, we also come to recognize more clearly the ethical and normative contours of alternative

possibilities, enabling us also to pose further critical questions. For example: In what ways, if at all, do fantasies linked to the MPs' expenses crisis resonate with fantasies underpinning the construction of the preceding and concurrent financial crisis? How might the reiteration of particular fantasies make more or less palatable (neoliberal) cuts to public sector spending? Such an investigation might not only point to potential counter-narratives, but also push us to explore more deeply the conditions under which our mode of attachment to, and not just the content of, our fantasies can shift. How, for example, do the social logics of the popular media's political economy reinforce certain fantasmatic contents and modalities? What counter-logics might contest profit-motivated practices whose aim is to secure and maintain a safe market share by satisfying well-known and predictable preferences? In this way, a psychoanalytically-inflected discourse theory helps open up a range of pathways to a critical media politics.

Notes

1. We would like to thank the editors of this volume, Sean Phelan and Lincoln Dahlberg, for their helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this chapter.
2. The period under investigation is the year 2009, from January 1 to December 31. We used "MPs' expenses" as our main search term in delimiting the corpus of the materials we analysed, comprising articles, leaders, editorials, opinion pieces, and letters. After immersing ourselves in the entire corpus, we entered a time-consuming and laborious process of sustained dialogical and dialectical engagement among ourselves, and between ourselves and the texts. This took the form of a spiral-like movement leading from posited interpretive frames to the empirical material and back again, until we achieved what we judged to be a point of reasonable equilibrium. Each press citation, therefore, is representative of a sizeable corpus of citations that embody for us key elements or themes in a broader narrative arrived at through thoroughgoing qualitative analysis.
3. It is interesting to note here how in her exploration of neoliberal subjectivity through her clinical material Lynne Layton discerns similar fantasies reproduced in a US context (Layton, 2010).

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6

The Media as the Neoliberalized Sediment: Articulating Laclau's Discourse Theory with Bourdieu's Field Theory[1]

Sean Phelan

The work of Laclau and Bourdieu can, in one sense, be opposed. If Laclau can be characterized as a political theorist who is antagonistic to a "sociologistic descriptivism" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 2), Bourdieu can be described as a sociologist who is antagonistic to abstract theory. Laclau (1990) criticizes sociology for occluding the political logic of the social, while Bourdieu (1990) reproaches scholastic articulations of theory for disparaging a positivistic interest in the empirical. To frame the relationship between Laclau and Bourdieu in these blanket terms is simplistic, and we should question to what extent the work of either can be cast in the other's generic projection. Nonetheless, to stylize their differences in discourse theoretical terms, we can say that while Laclau's work has been preoccupied with emphasizing the "radical contingency" of social practices, Bourdieu has focused more purposefully on understanding their "sedimentation" and stickiness (Glynos & Howarth, 2007).

A detailed comparison of the social ontologies of Laclau and Bourdieu is beyond the scope of this chapter.[2] We can see how key assumptions of both theorists – for instance, Laclau's (1996) concept of the "empty signifier" or Bourdieu's (2000) commitment to a scientific epistemology – might be difficult to reconcile.[3] Nonetheless, as Lane (2006) suggests, there are some important philosophical affinities between both theorists' work. Both affirm the radically historicized nature of reason, and both insist that the absence of a fixed ontological foundation should not be cause for philosophical resignation (Bourdieu, 2000; Laclau, 1990). Both follow Saussure in emphasizing the relational, as opposed to the substance-based, character of social and political analysis (Swartz, 1997; Laclau, 1990). Both endeavor to transcend an economistic Marxism and

the theoretical legacy of a base–superstructure metaphor (Bourdieu, 1992; Laclau, 1990). Both interrogate a wider set of philosophical dualisms, most obviously the assumption of a neat ontological distinction between objective and subjective practices (Swartz, 1997; Laclau, 1990). Both underline the political nature of social practice and – although Bourdieu (2000), at least, would not want the categories collapsed – the interpenetration of power and knowledge (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Both distance themselves from the rhetoric of a "truly radical" (Laclau, 1996, p. 17) break, by suggesting that social change emerges through political disruptions within the horizon of a sedimented inheritance (Bourdieu, 2000). And, finally, although their work is organized around two different categories – discourse for Laclau and practice for Bourdieu – Laclau has observed how his conception of discourse is "close to that which in other approaches has been called 'practice'" (Laclau, 2004, p. 280).

Such broad theoretical similarities are perhaps easy to identify and could be extended to others. This chapter examines the relationship between Laclau and Bourdieu in a more concrete way by grounding the comparison in a discussion of the problematic of neoliberalization and media democracy. I argue that the articulation of discourse theory with field theory has pragmatic analytical benefits for a critical media politics that also addresses criticisms made against both theories.[4] Although its "mezzolevel" focus on "interorganizational" dynamics is an obvious methodological strength of field theory media research (Benson & Neveu, 2005, p. 11), Couldry (2003a) suggests that it is also perhaps a limitation, since it potentially deflects attention from the question of "the media's" more general symbolic power. Laclau's work is therefore suggestive, as its focus on the hegemonized nature of the social, and the articulation of a tendentially empty universality, transcends a more circumscribed analysis of the journalistic field. Conversely, field theory's focus on institutional horizons and embodied subjectivities, and the productivity of concepts such as field, habitus, doxa, capital, and symbolic violence, facilitates a more sophisticated analysis of material-discursive constraints than Laclau's broadstroke appeals to social sedimentation. I argue therefore that a discourse theoretical approach to media politics can productively gain from the addition of a field theory "supplement"[5] (Nash, 2002, p. 97), as the latter facilitates a socially situated analysis of conjunctural and historical constraints that cannot be illuminated as satisfactorily by ontological level theorizations.

This chapter's use of the term neoliberalism partly follows its typical critical usage – as a name for describing how social and cultural relations have been increasingly articulated as market and economic

relations since the 1970s and 1980s (see the introduction to this collection).[6] Nonetheless, I want to distance myself from a monolithic grand narrative about the relationship between neoliberalism, media and democracy, particularly since ideological identification with neoliberal assumptions has, in some respects at least, been destabilized as a consequence of the ongoing global financial crisis. The problem with a totalizing narrative is that it can cultivate subsumptive[7] forms of analysis (Glynos & Howarth, 2007), where neoliberalism is too quickly presented as "a coherent ideological project with clear and unambiguous origins, whose spread is sustained and circulated by an identifiable set of institutions" (Barnett, 2005, p. 7). Notwithstanding its capacity for more distinct political economy or cultural studies inflexions, I also share Hallin's (2008) concerns about how the neoliberalism story is typically glossed in media studies as an "Age" dominated by the "logic of the market" (p. 43). "All too often . . . this way of telling the story of media and social changes rests content with vague and simplistic formulations, which . . . are far from adequate to understand the changes that have taken place in media and social systems over this period" (p. 43).

Rather than thinking in terms of the reified category of neoliberalism (Bowman, 2007), I propose that it is more theoretically and methodologically productive to speak of neoliberal *and* neoliberalized logics that are hegemonically articulated as part of a contextually situated dialectic of political, social, and fantasmatic logics.[8] I concur with Clarke's (2008) suggestion that it is more useful to think in terms of the "neo-liberalization of things" (p. 13), as that perspective retains a critical focus on how social institutions and practices, in this case media democratic "regimes" (Glynos & Howarth, 2007), can be articulated as other than neoliberal. The emphasis on a "logics" approach follows Laclau and Mouffe (2001) and, more specifically, Glynos and Howarth's (2007) articulation of logics as the "basic unit of explanation" (p. 8) underpinning a discourse theoretical approach to social analysis. They describe "*the logic of a practice [as comprising] the rules or grammar of the practice,* as well as *the conditions which make the practice both possible and vulnerable*" (p. 136). While Glynos and Howarth's work is only loosely appropriated here, their development of the category of "social logics" (that is, social sedimentation) as a methodological counter-weight to Laclau's emphasis on "political logics" (that is, radical contingency) suggests a basic homology to this chapter's approach (p. 141). The distinctiveness of the argument asserted here is the claim that, despite the richness of a logics framework, a critical media politics cannot be satisfactorily formulated on discourse theoretical terms alone.

I mainly use the signifier media democracy in quite a delimited way: as a descriptive and ethico-normative term for signifying the structuring and colonizing effects that mainstream "media communication has on the substance of the political itself" in liberal capitalist democracies (Meyer, 2002, p. xi).[9] The ethico-normative dimension of my analysis is also underpinned by a theoretical supposition that one of the hallmarks of neoliberalized media democratic regimes is their repressive pluralism. Drawing on the critical account of pluralism formulated by Connolly (2005), the latter attempts to capture the character of media democratic norms that valorize plurality and difference, while nonetheless inscribing the logic of the political within a set of discursive logics that put antagonistic limits on the possibilities of a more radically pluralist democracy. While the concept of pluralism is not an explicit concern of the analysis, my account of contemporary media democracy is developed in more detail later in this chapter, when I identity five key logics – logics of market determinism, commodification, individualization, competitive ritual, and self-interest – as being particularly important to the ongoing rearticulation of neoliberalized regimes. I also consider the possibility of social change, and examine how both discourse theory and field theory might be used to conceptualize another kind of media democracy (for a very different articulation of the latter, see McChesney & Nichols, 2010) which transcends the sedimented norms of neoliberalized regimes.

Finally, although the empirical dimension of my analysis is essentially illustrative, I should note that – unlike some of the other chapters in this collection – the category of media democracy is articulated here primarily in terms of an implicit focus on more mainstream journalistic field institutions like print and television.[10] The category is an empirical simplification in a second respect: there is no media democracy as such, but different media democracies constituted by hegemonic dynamics and field relations that, although in some respects globalized and globalizing, are particular to the local cultural and social context (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The empirical context that informs my analysis is, in the most general sense, Anglo-American, the model of media democracy that is most obviously identified with neoliberalized practices.

The journalistic field and habitus

While Anglo-American media and communication researchers have been discussing Bourdieu's work since the early 1980s (see, for example, Garnham & Williams, 1980), the purposeful theoretical engagement

with the concept of the journalistic field has been a more recent development (for a detailed overview, see Benson & Neveu, 2005). Field theory anchors the sociology of journalism and media in a distinct "mezzolevel" framework, which Benson and Neveu (2005) distinguish from the economism of political economy approaches and site-specific "newsroom organizational ethnographies" (pp. 10–11). They suggest that the concept of the field "opens up a new *unit of analysis* for media research: the entire universe of journalists and media organizations acting and reacting in relation to one another" (p. 11). The guiding theoretical assumption is that the "the real is relational" (p. 3), and that the identity of a particular media outlet or journalist cannot be ontologically separated from their relative positioning within the overall journalistic space. The ontological category of the field can therefore be conceptualized as an example of what Laclau, in a description of his own work, calls "a real abstraction": a "theoretical horizon whose abstractions are not merely analytical but real abstractions on which the constitution of identities and political articulations depends" (Laclau, 2000, pp. 87–8).

Bourdieu speaks of a general "ontological complicity" (cited in Topper, 2005, p. 167) between field and habitus, where the dispositional tendencies of particular social agents are dynamically marked by their field-based location(s) in social space. The concept of habitus underlines the materially embodied and historically conditioned nature of social subjectivities; "social agents are endowed with habitus, inscribed in their bodies by past experiences" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 138). Habitus foregrounds how the perceptual horizon of social agents is intertwined with the "objective" character of social fields that are both structuring, yet also generative of, identities (Bourdieu, 2000; Bourdieu, 1977). The dialectical (Swartz, 1997) imbrication of field and habitus is supplemented by the category of doxa, which denotes the prereflexive categorical schemes that are taken for granted within a particular field: a "set of fundamental beliefs which does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 15). The emphasis on subjective identities marked by a plurality of field relations, rather than mechanically determined by a particular field, is important, as it would be simplistic to explain the journalistic habitus – as if it amounted to a singular reified disposition – with exclusive reference to the journalistic field only. The inculcated disposition of any social agent, in the journalistic field or elsewhere, is constituted by their individuated transition through a variety of social fields, most obviously familial, educational, and class.

Bourdieu formulates the heuristic distinction between autonomous and heteronomous fields (Bourdieu, 1990, 1991, 2005) to give analytical form to understanding the networked power relations between different social spaces. By autonomous fields, he means those fields, or subfields, that are relatively independent from the "meta-field" of power (cited in Swartz, 1997, p. 136). In a time of neoliberalized hegemony, this would be a description of social spaces that manage to insulate themselves, to some extent at least, from the structuring effects of market-state imperatives. In contrast, heteronomy signifies social fields with weak levels of autonomy, thus implying a high level of dependency on, and colonization by, the meta-field of power. Thus, working with this distinction, the general character of the (neo)liberal democratic journalistic field can be described as heteronomous, in that most mainstream media institutions are structurally constrained by their economic dependency on advertising and ratings; or, in the case of state-owned media, doubly constrained by their more direct vulnerability to the shifting priorities of the political field (Champagne, 2005). Bourdieu was also concerned about the heteronomous effects of the journalistic field on other social fields, such as the academic field (Bourdieu, 1990), whose relative autonomy, he argued, is increasingly undermined by the structuring effects of media power.

An embryonic field theory conceptualization of the problematic of neoliberalization and media democracy was articulated by Bourdieu (1998) in his popular book, *On Television and Journalism*. This deliberately polemical intervention met with a defensive response from some media researchers: either misread as a version of the Frankfurt School thesis (see Neveu, 2005), or dismissed as a celebrity articulation of media studies truisms (Corner, 1999). The emerging field theory literature has, in contrast, assumed a more circumscribed focus on the journalistic field, thus distancing itself from a generalized thesis about media power. This tight methodological focus has generated sophisticated empirical analyses (Benson, 2009) that belie some of the totalizing claims underpinning Bourdieu's critique of both media and neoliberalism (Lane, 2006). The articulation of a comparative field theory methodology (Darras, 2005) has also helped give a concrete empirical grounding to normative debates about the conditions of different media democracies. Nonetheless, Couldry (2003a) suggests that the narrower focus on the journalistic field creates a dilemma for field theory research, which sits uneasily with its – at least latent – desire for a more general account of media power. As he puts it:

> . . . there is . . . something paradoxical about [field-based media research], at least viewed from other media research traditions, in that

> it avoids both a general account of the impacts of media representation on social space *and* a detailed account of media audiences. Its explanatory dynamics are located entirely in the internal workings of the journalistic field or in the specific connections between those internal workings and the operations of other fields that come into contact with it. The result is often to extend in interesting ways Anglo-US work on the sociology of media production. The cost, however, is a tension between the avoidance of theoretical issues that arise outside the field model and the bolder judgments about media that its proponents [and its figure head' (see Bourdieu, 1998)], probably justifiably, want to make. (Couldry, 2003a, pp. 655–6)

Couldry's proposal for reconciling the tension between specific and general analyses of media resonates with this chapter's argument for linking field theory to discourse theory. He identifies a solution in Bourdieu's own work – specifically, his "Durkheim-inspired" (Couldry, 2003a, p. 656) analysis of the state as a generalized site of symbolic power. Couldry notes Bourdieu's emphasis on the state's capacity to confer "meta-capital" across social space (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 114). The concept of "meta-capital" (Couldry, 2003a, p. 666) follows Bourdieu's general conception of how power struggles, within and between fields, involve struggles over the distribution of different forms of capital – namely economic, cultural, social, and symbolic – including contestation over how the most variable forms of capital and prestige are to be constituted. Couldry argues that the notion of "meta-capital" can be extended to the media, since, like the state, the media's symbolic power spans the entire social order. This supplementary emphasis therefore suggests the need for a theoretical and methodological approach that transcends an internalized focus on the journalistic field, by examining the latter's power to shape, often repressively, the internalized dynamics of other social fields (Meyer, 2002).

In view of this chapter's argument for pragmatically articulating Bourdieu with Laclau, we now need to briefly consider some of the differences between the existing journalistic field literature and discourse theory. First, in terms of its self-positioning vis-à-vis other approaches, Benson and Neveu (2005) gloss the contribution of "hegemony theory" in a way that sidesteps Laclau's specific theorization of the concept. They equate hegemony with totalizing forms of "functionalist-style" analysis, where media power is conceptualized in unitary terms that essentially "reinforce the power status quo" (p. 9). Laclau's work may retain the traditional Marxist emphasis on how the social, as a totality,

has been hegemonized. Yet, by rearticulating hegemony as an ontological category (Howarth, 2004) that asserts how all social identities are hegemonized – and, thus, open to being constituted differently – discourse theory breaks from the functionalist identity projected by Benson and Neveu.

Similarly, Benson and Neveu (2005) distinguish field theory from linguistic and semiotic approaches to social analysis, or "at least those which portray symbolic systems as untethered from the social world" (p. 10). Foucauldian cultural studies and, by implication, discursive approaches are positioned in opposition to materialist approaches, thus echoing Bourdieu's (1992) own tendency to see discourse analysis as idealist and distinct from materialist analysis. This chapter is not the place for a detailed discussion of the problems in Bourdieu's account of the relationship between discourse and materiality (see Butler, 1999). Myles (2004) identifies a key limitation in Bourdieu's tendency to assert an "absolute distinction . . . between discourse rationality and embodied sensibility" (p. 94). Lane (2006) criticizes Bourdieu's inclination to see habitus as simply "expressive" of fixed field interests, rather than discursively "constructed" (p. 70). The important conceptual point to note here is that Benson and Neveu's distancing of a materialist field theory from discursive approaches is incongruent with Laclau's insistence on the constitutive imbrication of discursive and material practices.

A second tension between field theory and discourse theory relates to their different articulations of the political. Field theory researchers note how social fields, including the journalistic field, are constituted by contingent acts of power. To formulate the point in discourse theoretical terms, we could say that there is a recognition of how the social is constituted through political logics. However, the contingency of this foundational moment can be obscured by the tendency to locate "politics" as a regional field of social practice, rather than a generalized ontological horizon. Swartz (1997) and Frangie (2009) identify this as a general tension in Bourdieu's work. Despite Bourdieu's typical glossing of the political field as referring "specifically [to] political institutions and actors," he sometimes equates it with "the whole field of power relations in politics and society" (Swartz, 1997, p. 139). There is obviously much more that could be said about Bourdieu's conception of the political (see Wacquant, 2004; Lane, 2006). The point to underline here is that by supplementing field theory with discourse theory's more sophisticated conception of social practice as grounded in the necessary contingency of the political (Laclau, 1990), we can develop a clearer theoretical understanding of how the identities of fields are hegemonically

articulated and vulnerable to political disruption. Moreover, Laclau's (2005) emphasis on the inherently dislocated character of social objectivity focuses attention on the heterogeneous elements that are excluded from any configuration of field relations (Thomassen, 2005).

Third, while field theory researchers have employed a range of different methods, much of the research has valorized a rigorous empirical approach in keeping with Bourdieu's own enthusiasm for statistical methods. Benson (2004) defends the epistemological validity of quantitative research grounded in the "language of dependent and independent variables" against constructionist critiques, suggesting that "the simple lumping together of factors [for example, a generic appeal to 'culture' as an explanatory factor] . . . offers little hope of any insight into the significant variation, cross-nationally and across types of news outlets within a national context" (p. 285). Benson's essential concern here would, despite their very different orientations, be shared by Laclau (1990): that the explanatory power of social and political analysis is weakened when anchored in appeals to hypostatized – that is abstract and reified – entities such as "culture," "the economy," or, in the case of this chapter, "neoliberalism." Discourse theorists may not share Benson's enthusiasm for conventional cause and effect models. However, the key point to note is that this chapter's articulation of a "logics" approach to critical explanation also wants to distinguish itself from subsumptive forms of analysis that are over-reliant on theoretical or empirical generalizations (Glynos & Howarth, 2007).

Neoliberalization and the meta-field of power

Now that field theory has been summarily discussed, we need to give some brief consideration of how it might approach this chapter's theoretical and methodological problematic of neoliberalization and media democracy. I will limit the discussion to three observations. First, the analysis needs to be located at the level of the "meta-field of power," since the constitutive effects of neoliberalization obviously extend across a whole spectrum of social fields. Neoliberalization may, because of its typical glossing as an economic ideology, be most easily conceptualized in terms of the heteronomous and colonizing effects of economic field imperatives. Yet this conceptualization of our research problematic is too linear and conceals how practices in – to limit our focus here – the journalistic and institutional political fields are also generative of neoliberalized practices. We need therefore to focus on how specific journalistic practices can be neoliberalized (for example, the enactment of

a fourth estate and watchdog identity), while avoiding the reductionist trap of seeing these "things" as exclusively neoliberal phenomena.

Second, a field theory approach would explore how the dispositional tendencies of media democracies have been neoliberalized, both from the perspective of the journalistic field's comportment towards the political field, and also vice versa. This cross-field dynamic can be conceptualized in terms of a series of banal two-way projection effects, where agents in both fields anticipate a certain performative disposition on the part of the other. Consider, for instance, the commonplace journalistic tendency to project narrow self-interested motivations (Hay, 2007) onto political field actors. This much was evident in the media framing of the 2009 MPs' expenses scandals in the UK and elsewhere, where the obviously legitimate coverage about the expenses indulgence of particular politicians was sometimes articulated as fantasmatic representations of an entire political class (see the chapter in this volume by Chang and Glynos). Conversely, the neoliberalization of political agents' disposition toward the journalistic field is encapsulated by their internalization of certain performative idioms and rituals – for example, the soundbyte quip, televisual image, or personalized anecdote – that become a constitutive requirement of the mediated political persona (Corner, 2003).

Third, these inter-field dynamics are worth considering further with reference to the concept of symbolic violence. Bourdieu (2000) defines symbolic violence as a violence that is typically hidden and unrecognized, which the dominated party is complicit in "because they help to *construct* it as such" (p. 171). It amounts to the "inscription of a relation of domination into the body," where the "efficacy of external necessities depends upon the efficacy of an internal necessity" (p. 169). We can at least hypothesize about the neoliberalized forms of symbolic violence that are inscribed in the mundane interaction of agents in the journalistic and institutional political fields. Serious journalists who wish for more professional autonomy and comprehensive reporting are structurally forced to construct storytelling frames that are heteronomously dominated by economic field logics. Political field agents who want to talk about substantive policies are structurally obliged – as are a wider range of social actors – to comply with often-trivializing media scripts. The value of the concept of symbolic violence is that it helps us understand how these repressive dynamics might go unrecognized as repressive, their cultural omnipresence obscuring their contingency as politically structured dispositions. This reinforces Bourdieu's (2000) conception of habitus and doxa as unconscious and pre-reflexive, where the coherence of the social formation is enacted though the practical

embodiment of routine social practices, rather than at the level of an explicit ideological consciousness.

The preceding two sections have given a summary account of field theory and considered how it might be used to conceptualize the methodological problematic of neoliberalization and media democracy. We now need to consider the same research question from a discourse theoretical perspective, focusing on those concepts that are most suggestive in terms of this chapter's argument for articulating discourse theory with field theory.

Hegemonic universality and neoliberalized sedimentation

Laclau's identity may be positioned in opposition to the strong universalism of figures like Habermas. Yet the concept of the universal is nonetheless central to his work (see introduction to this volume). Laclau's (2005) concept of hegemonic universality situates the universal as a "tendentially empty" (p. 131) horizon that is filled as a consequence of hegemonic struggle between different discourses. He speaks of a "failed totality" (p. 70) and universalism, where the failure and impossibility of the universal becomes the ontological condition facilitating the very possibility of a politics. For Laclau, universalism, in a strict sense, would represent a closure of politics, since it would deny the irreducible negativity inscribed in all objective social practices and identities. At the same time, he distances himself from any strong postmodernist inclination to disavow the universal, since that would leave us with a particularistic politics that rejects the possibility of universalizing equivalences between different political demands.

The argument can only be sketched here in a cursory way. However, I propose that Laclau's theorization of universality can be usefully articulated with Bourdieu's (2000) emphasis on the power dynamics of "strategies of universalization" (p. 122). Bourdieu's conception of universality may be different from Laclau's in some fundamental respects. He would question Laclau's emphasis on the tendentially empty character of universality, and equate it instead with the institutionalization of historically produced field conditions that are linked, in particular, to the agency of the state, which he describes as the "site of universality" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 124). Nonetheless, Bourdieu (2000) clearly emphasizes how universality is constituted through a "realpolitik of reason" (p. 126), in clear opposition to Habermas's attempt – the latter again taking on the identity of the stylized Other – to locate the universal in a "scholastic" domain of "communicative action," which, in Bourdieu's

view, ignores how "cognitive interests are rooted in strategic or instrumental social interests . . . and that domination is never absent from social relations of communication" (p. 65).[11] I therefore want to suggest that Laclau's insistence on a universality grounded in the ontological primacy of the political and radical contingency can be articulated in a coherent way with Bourdieu's account of social practice. The principal theoretical benefit is that it gives a sharper conceptual emphasis to Bourdieu's own insights on the political constitution of social objectivity. The methodological value, from a media politics perspective, is that it focuses clearer attention on how the journalistic field and habitus, and the wider set of field relations in which they are embedded, have been hegemonized.

This chapter's stylized positioning of Bourdieu as a theorist of sedimentation, and Laclau as a theorist of contingency, de-emphasizes the extent to which discourse theory also explains social reproduction. The field of discursivity, as an ontological horizon, may render any discourse inherently vulnerable. Yet Laclau also recognizes the capacity of particular discourses to assume a taken-for-granted social authority, which, despite their constitutive incompleteness, can be difficult to disrupt. This process of social sedimentation is conceptualized in spatial and material terms, where social practice is regulated by naturalized and institutionalized systems of differences which Laclau (1990, p. 63) describes as "social imaginaries." These imaginaries function as the truth horizon of social practices that are the routinized product of affective and ideological investments that are patterned into subjects' everyday material-discursive lives. They institutionalize a hegemonized social objectivity that "is nothing but the sedimented form of power, in other words, a power whose traces have been erased" (p. 60).

Laclau's conceptualization of sedimentation in spatial terms suggests an appropriate methodological fit with Bourdieu's field metaphor. The principal advantage of the theoretical supplement is that field theory can explain social sedimentation at a concrete institutional level that, despite his conception of the social as a "multiplicity of power centres" (Laclau, 1990, p. 59), is not clearly articulated in Laclau's work. Laclau's more abstract focus on the political institutionalization of the social tells us little about the inter- and intra-field specificity of social antagonisms. He would not deny that there is a politics of institutions. However, his tendency to see "politics and space . . . [as] antinomic terms" (p. 68) fosters a theoretical disposition that de-emphasizes the distinct strategic and instrumentalist challenges involved in institutional power struggles (Barnett, 2003; Norval, 2007). This ontical level

gap in discourse theory is, in one sense, recognized by Laclau, who consistently emphasizes how his work operates at an ontological level. Yet it is sometimes glossed over in cursory assertions about "institutions," as sedimented "systems of differences," being "fully present" in his work (Laclau, 1990, p. 223) – a formulation that recalls Hall's (1986) criticism of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* "for producing the concrete philosophically" (p. 58). This institutional deficit (Bowman, 2007; Miklitsch, 1995; Mouzelis, 1988) hampers the socially situated analysis of media politics, because it downplays the extent to which the logic of the political is now constituted through mediatized practices. More specifically, it does not capture how the performative idioms of media democratic regimes can constrain discursive practice, by naturalizing the representation of *any* popular political demand through certain dispositional tendencies and sedimented field practices.

Neoliberal logics, antagonisms, and media democracy

We now need to consider how a discursive logics approach might conceptualize our methodological problematic of neoliberalization and media democracy. Working with this conception, I see five neoliberal logics as being particularly important to the neoliberalization of media democratic regimes. First, a logic of market determinism, which describes how social agents internalize the assumption that institutional practices, including media practices, *must* be justified in market terms. This can be inflected in different ways, some more transparently ideological than others. I would argue that a more pragmatic and common sense inflexion is particularly effective in media spaces, partly because of its homology with the realist posture of journalistic identities (Aune, 2001). Moreover, it resonates with a journalistic discourse that – sometimes for good reasons – is suspicious of an alternative reliance on the agency of the state.

Second, a logic of commodification, which describes the increasing commodification of social and mediatized identities. This is evident in the increasingly hyperbolic marketing of journalistic identities and, more furtively, in the network of surveillance and data-gathering practices that now regulate modern political communication (Stanyer, 2008). It is also evident in the self-commodification strategies of media intellectuals and pundits with a proficiency in the kind of performative dispositions that confer prestige and authority in media spaces.

Third, a logic of individualization, which denotes the increasing preoccupation with individual, rather than collective, identities, and the

normalization of self-expressive modes of public discourse (Stanyer, 2008; Corner, 2003). This logic is evident in, for example, the increasing presidentialization of election campaigns, and the strategic importance of personal life narratives as forms of political capital. It is also discernible in a variety of journalistic field practices, including the higher economic and symbolic profits that now accrue to polemical forms of journalism; the inflexion of "objective" news reportage through an opinionated register; the enthusiasm for self-expressive, and cheap, contributions from "*you,* the audience"; the preference for personalized forms of storytelling; and the fetishization of news vox-pops with "ordinary" (Couldry, 2003b) individuals. This logic is often articulated with a fourth logic, a logic of competitive ritual, which captures the increasing normalization of competitive idioms in public discourse (the exemplary form being reality television; see Chapter 5 by Gilbert).

Fifth, a logic of self-interest, which describes the tendency to explain publicly visible behavior and action in narrow self-interested terms. Hay (2007) argues that rational choice assumptions have become naturalized in common sense discourses about politics. His argument applies, a fortiori, to journalist dispositions, though I am not suggesting that journalists, as a rule, consciously adhere to a transparently neoliberal or rational choice picture of the world. However, it is worth noting how some of the key constitutive elements of a generalized rational choice disposition – its agent-centric logic of methodological individualism, positivist epistemology, focus on the immediate and the synchronic rather the historically constituted, and its default attribution of self-interested motives to social and political actors – have close homologies in a news values disposition that is specifically journalistic, and also the basis of a more general performative competency in media spaces.

There is obviously much more that could be said about the historical emergence and naturalization of neoliberal logics, particularly their relationship to current transformations in media political economy. However, the basic claim here is that the dialectical articulation of the five aforementioned logics are key constituent factors in the neoliberalization of media democracy. This should not imply that these analytically distinct logics are, by definition, always regressive. The discursive effect depends on the contextual articulation. Some "progressively" articulated media identities may just as conceivably be structured by logics of commodification and individualization as Fox News anchors. It would also be wrong-headed to articulate a blanket condemnation of media democratic norms that are more attentive to issues of individual accountability, and, in some respects at least, more open to a democratizing and networked

dynamic between journalists and audiences. The argument here is that, when articulated as a typically messy, yet nonetheless coherent totality – we could even say that its messiness is its ideological strength – these logics enculturate and normalize a neoliberalized imaginary in mediatized spaces.

The antagonistic dimension underpinning this neoliberalized imaginary is important. Discourse theory emphasizes how any discourse needs a "constitutive outside" (Laclau, 2004, p. 32) to come into being. This outside consists of two distinct aspects: an antagonistic dimension, where a particular discourse articulates its identity in opposition to a demonized Other; and a heterogeneous dimension, which references a field of discursive possibilities that go beyond the logic of the antagonism (Laclau, 2004; Stäheli, 2004; Thomassen, 2005). Laclau (2005) characterizes the constitutive condition of social antagonisms as, following Derrida, simultaneously "impossible and necessary" (p. 71): necessary because identities are constituted through difference, yet impossible because of the excluded elements that, when reactivated, undermine the coherence of the antagonism.

The most important antagonistic dimension from within a neoliberalized imaginary is basically anti-intellectual, anti-elitist, and anti-ideological, the performative assumption being that proponents of a neoliberal identity somehow share none of these Othered attributes. The affective power of this antagonistic discourse is considerable, in part because of its capacity to infuse a raft of wounded subjectivities (Connolly, 2008). The specificity of the claim needs to be clarified. This is not a sweeping empirical claim about the anti-intellectual character of mass media spaces. Nor should it be seen as an echo of Bourdieu's (1998) tendency to disparage the sphere of journalistic common sense (Ekström, 2003). However, it is to suggest that when challenges to neoliberalized regimes and norms are articulated, they are often met with a market populist discourse (Frank, 2000; see also Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999) that is articulated as democratic and egalitarian, and often particularly scathing of political dispositions that see the state as an alternative ideological guarantor to the market. This dynamic is clearly visible, in a very theatrical form, in the emergence of an anti-Obama discursive frontier in US media politics since the 2008 election. This neoliberalized discourse is not impenetrable and, in an increasingly porous journalistic field, there is hardly an absence of media spaces to critique its more fantasmatic enactments. However, recent talk about the end of neoliberalism is premature, and makes the mistake of seeing neoliberalization as a narrow policy prescription,[12] rather than a cultural template

for how subjectivities have been articulated according to "dominant individualistic norms . . . that unlink the social from the individual" and see dependency – on others or the state – as shameful (Layton, 2010, p. 312). Sedimented identification with this discourse endures, perhaps most effectively when its status as an ideological disposition is obscured to subjects themselves.

The possibility of a radical democratic media politics?

This chapter's core argument is, in one sense, prosaic. If it is a discourse theoretical truism to suggest that equivalences can potentially be established between any two identities,[13] well, then, the claim that Bourdieu and Laclau can be articulated together is not surprising. My specific argument is that their pragmatic articulation helps us develop a more sophisticated analysis of how media democracies have been neoliberalized. The value of field theory is that it focuses closer attention on the material specificity and institutional configuration of neoliberalized regimes. The comparative value of discourse theory is that it foregrounds the role of discursive and identificatory logics in the constitution and reproduction of neoliberalized imaginaries.

It is one thing to hypothetically describe the condition of the existing social order. But how might this chapter's articulation of discourse theory and field theory help us envision an alternative? The problematic can be reformulated in discourse theoretical terms: how can the sedimented authority of the neoliberalized media democratic imaginary be dislocated and disrupted? While I only have space to consider these questions in a very broad manner, I want to at least suggest some strategic approaches to addressing them. I will focus on, first, how discourse theory would conceptualize the possibility of a more radical democratic kind of media politics, and, second, how the gaps in that account could be usefully supplemented by field theory insights.

A discourse theoretical approach would emphasize the precariousness of any media democratic formation and, therefore, foreground the strategic possibility of disrupting the contours of a neoliberalized imaginary. This conception of critical "intervention" (Bowman, 2007) can be given different typological articulations. One radical approach would emphasize the need for the construction of an antagonistic discursive frontier articulated in firm opposition to sedimented norms. This approach is, for instance, clearly visible in the articulation of some alternative media identities (for example, Indymedia), which articulate a discourse in clear opposition to mainstream assumptions. In its most antagonistic and

populist form, this would be articulated less as an opposition to the specific neoliberalization of media democracy, but more as a rejection, in toto, of a mainstream media infrastructure (because of its complicity with the capitalist state). This approach would be underpinned by normative prescriptions for a more participatory media democracy that would challenge mainstream journalistic field norms (such as the ongoing identification with the principles of journalistic objectivity and neutrality).

A second approach would allow for a more nuanced interpretation of Laclau's (2005) work on populism. Rather than equating a radical democratic antagonistic frontier with a blanket anti-institutionalism, it would underline Laclau's recognition of the moment of institutionalization and decision as a necessary counterpart to the strictly political moment. The strategic emphasis would therefore be on the disturbance of mainstream media democratic logics, rather than their outright rejection. This approach would still see the articulation of an identity in clear opposition to sedimented assumptions. Yet, performatively, it might refrain from a strong antagonistic posture (the "agonistic" metaphor is more appropriate here – see Connolly, 2005; Mouffe, 2005), and be constructed as a disarticulation or rearticulation of familiar discursive logics. It might also explicate heterogeneous elements and possibilities that are rendered invisible within sedimented regimes, rather than necessarily follow a tight normative prescription. One example of this kind of media democratic identity would be Wikileaks. Although the website represents a clear challenge to established media democratic norms around state and corporate secrecy, its social libertarian identity is articulated through familiar rhetorical appeals to "transparency" and "good governance" (Wikileaks, 2010) that bear at least some "family resemblance" to neoliberalized discourses. Moreover, its mythical identity resonates with mainstream journalism narratives by citing the historical importance of the US Supreme Court ruling on the Pentagon Papers. The recent consecration of the site by mainstream media institutions like *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Der Spiegel*, through the aligned publication of the Afghanistan and Iraq war logs, and the US diplomatic cables, also shows the possibility of a critical media politics that belies any simplistic dichotomization of populist and institutional identities.

A third articulation of a discourse theoretical approach to media democratic change could – if we excise the word's pejorative connotations – be described as more "reformist" in orientation. This approach would focus on the possibility of political contestation within institutional

assemblages, where social agents seek to strategically disturb, by reappropriating and rearticulating, the constitutive logics and performative idioms of neoliberalized regimes (Bowman, 2007; Kaplan, 2010). For example, a journalistic projection of self-interested motivation could be projected back on to the journalist themselves. The repressive and parsimonious nature of self-interested logics, as normally conceived, could be deconstructed. Or a logic of individual freedom and anti-elitism could be used to represent the market, rather than the state, as the instrument of collective enslavement. While such micro-political strategies should not be seen as incompatible with more antagonistic forms of critical intervention, this approach would emphasize the potential for routinized political disturbances within a sedimentation system of differences. In that sense, it runs contrary to Laclau's tendency – particularly in his more recent work on populism – to characterize the sedimented social order as a space of "social automatisms" (Laclau, 2006, p. 112), since agency for Laclau (1990, p. 6) is basically equated with the decision taken in a moment of social dislocation (Kaplan, 2010). At the same time, a strict demarcation of dislocatory and sedimented logics would represent a caricature of Laclau's (1990) earlier work, since this strategic impulse is present in his observation – one he identifies as "Marxist" – that "the construction of an alternative project is *based on* the grounds created by [earlier social] transformations, not on *opposition to* them" (pp. 55–6).

The value of a field theory supplement

I have given a brief account of some of the ways discourse theory could be used to envision an alternative media democratic order. The productivity of this theoretical approach is not in doubt. However, it begs the question: what can field theory illuminate that isn't already captured by discourse theory? Certainly, the two theoretical vocabularies should not be regarded as mutually exclusive, and, at some generic level, both could be used to formulate similar critical analyses of neoliberalization and media democracy. However, I maintain that the argument for supplementing a discourse theoretical approach with field theoretical insights amounts to more than a "nominalist shell game" (Gitlin, 2004, p. 309), where a different vocabulary is used to gloss much the same thing. While the argument can only be made in a preliminary way here, I propose that articulating both approaches together enables us to better envision a media democratic order that might transcend the repressive pluralism of neoliberalized regimes.

A critical media politics needs to be conceived as a politics of the journalistic field and habitus, otherwise we risk falling into the trap of simply seeing the sedimented media infrastructure, and the performative dispositions inculcated in and by it, as a neutral transmission mechanism of political practice. Wacquant (2004) makes a similar point, when, in a glossing of Bourdieu's position, he suggests that:

> For genuine and lasting progressive change to occur, a politics of fields aimed at structured power relations must of necessity be *supplemented by a politics of habitus*, paying close attention to the social production and modalities of expression of political proclivities. (p. 10)

And then, citing Bourdieu (2000), he adds:

> [This is because] symbolic action cannot, by itself, and outside of any transformation of the conditions of production and reinforcement of dispositions, extirpate embodied beliefs, passions, and pulsions that remain thoroughly indifferent to the injunctions or condemnations of humanistic universalism (itself also rooted in dispositions and beliefs). (Wacquant, 2004, p. 10)[14]

While Laclau would be equally critical of the "injunctions or condemnations of humanistic universalism," Bourdieu's general point is worth reflecting on here, because it suggests that discursive and identificatory appeals, displaced from a concrete analysis of sedimented field conditions, are insufficient to bring about social change. This point is, in one respect, recognized by Laclau (1990), who, defending himself against the charge of voluntarism, observes how "an act of unmediated political institution is . . . impossible: [and that] any political construction takes places against the background of a range of sedimented practices" (p. 35). Nonetheless, his formalist – that is to say, ontological level – analysis of social transformation privileges the suasory power of identificatory logics, and does not satisfactorily capture how sedimented "embodied beliefs, passions, and pulsions," often *below* the level of conscious identifications and articulations, can constrain a discursive politics (for further discussion of Laclau's formalism, see the chapters by Gilbert and Simons). Laclau's appropriation of the concept of affect is certainly productive here, and resonates with Bourdieu's (2000) own emphasis on the "affective transaction" (p. 141) between habitus and field (see also McNay, 2001). However, their different renderings of the concept are telling. McNay (2003) argues that Bourdieu would reject

the presumption that the affective dimension of social practice can be satisfactorily explained through an abstract psychoanalytical framework emphasizing the negativity of identity and the structural links between fantasmatic dynamics and signifying practices (see also Dean, 2004).[15] He would instead emphasize the embodied and corporeal nature of affect, she suggests, and argue that submission to the sedimented order is best understood not through the idioms of discourse, consciousness and ideology, but as "a tacit and practical belief made possible by the habituation which arises from the training of the body" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 172). This emphasis on habitual practice is, in one sense, congruent with Laclau's account of sedimentation. However, it is telling that the body's prosaic everyday needs and functions are hardly ever discussed by Laclau (2005, p. 61), who is much more likely to refer to the "social body," rather than bodies per se. Reading Laclau through Bourdieu therefore recalls Bourdieu's (2000) criticism of traditional ideology critique for its utopian projection of a reawakened consciousness: "it inclines one to forget one of the most powerful mechanisms of the maintenance of the symbolic order, the *twofold naturalization* which results from the inscription of the social in things and in bodies" (p. 181).

Bourdieu's (2000) critique of theoretical discourses centered on the symbolic and the "language of the imaginary" (p. 171) points to some of the general limitations of discourse theory as a framework for strategically disturbing sedimented practices (Nash, 2002). The theoretical significance of the social and class position of subjects in articulatory terms is under-explored (Lane, 2006; McNay, 2003). The relationship between the reactivatory moment of political decision and the subject's prior identity is de-emphasized (Norris, 2006). The possible correlations between the efficacy of political articulations, particularly their capacity to be heard (Bowman, 2007), and the prior acquisition of different forms of capital are not clearly discussed (Bourdieu, 2000). Nor is the prosaic empirical fact that the social world, even a precariously positive one, is more contingent or sedimented for some than for others. The emphasis on sedimented constraints at the abstract level of the social and institutional does focus attention on how particular institutional complexes could be articulated and materialized differently. Yet how these conjunctural constraints might impose limitations on "innovative [political] imagination and action" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 234) cannot be clearly elucidated in a theoretical perspective operating in the "field of social ontology" (Laclau, 2004, p. 321).

Some examples may illustrate the argument more clearly. The journalistic field can be conceptualized as an exemplary site of social sedimentation,

since one of the principal functions of journalism is to chronicle the ongoing reproduction of the official social order (Hall et al., 1978/1999). The journalistic field may be the space where dislocations of the social are most obviously visible and dramatized. Yet the media representation of dislocatory moments – the September 11 attacks being the exemplar – typically takes place in a horizon of banal social reproduction (Billig, 1995), where the basic mass media forms are not radically altered and the dislocatory event is quickly absorbed into "normal" news practices. This suggests a specific correlation between journalistic field practices and sedimented social logics that cannot be clearly illuminated in a theoretical framework that focuses on the general ontological condition of *institutionalization* rather than specific institutions. The role of sedimented journalistic practices can exercise additional constraints on discursive practice. Consider, for example, the enduring identification with national and local forms of news packaging in the so-called globalization era (Hafez, 2007). To make these points is not to suggest that these and other journalistic field practices cannot be productively analysed using discourse theory. However, it is to suggest that abstract conceptual leaps from "the political" to "the social" can only illuminate so much about the possibility of a *strategically effective* critical media politics.

The case for supplementing discourse theory with field theory is more than a deficit argument and could also facilitate more creative forms of political "imagination" (Norval, 2007; Connolly, 2008). The analysis of inter-field tensions between the journalistic field and other social spaces such as the academic field could be enriched by Laclau's account of social antagonisms, heterogeneity, and dislocation. Discourse analyses of media democratic practices could be linked more clearly to ethico-political critiques of the journalistic habitus, and the kind of performative dispositions that are consecrated in neoliberalized media spaces. Progressive attempts to disrupt hegemonic field relations could find a useful normative supplement in Bourdieu's valorization of field autonomy. Bourdieu's (2000) emphasis on social change emerging through a "mismatch" (p. 159) of habitus and field could be usefully articulated with discourse theory's explicitly psychoanalytical inflexion of affect and dislocation.

Finally, the relationship between journalistic field dynamics and discourse theory's emphasis on social antagonism begs some specific questions. How are we to distinguish substantive – can we still say "real"? – political antagonisms from the journalistic field's tendency to banalize and reify antagonisms, and exaggerate or downplay moments of social dislocation? How can our understanding of political dislocations

take account of an under-resourced journalistic field's increasing vulnerability to manufactured dislocations? These questions can only be posed here. However, this chapter has hopefully made a cogent case for why the possibility of a different kind of media democracy cannot be imagined exclusively in discourse theoretical terms.

Notes

1. Many thanks to Lincoln Dahlberg and Jason Glynos for their comments on an earlier draft.
2. For a brief comparison of the work of Bourdieu and Laclau/Laclau and Mouffe, see Lane (2006).
3. The tensions between Laclau and Bourdieu's different accounts of universality are briefly discussed by Lane (2006). He also contrasts Laclau's foregrounding of ontological concerns with Bourdieu's tendency to reduce "the political to a set of purely empirical and epistemological problems" (p. 70). For a more detailed critique of the anti-political character of Bourdieu's work, particularly its scientific posture, see Rancière (2004).
4. Stressing the preliminary nature of this articulation is important, particularly given Laclau's (2004) warning that "in spite of the homologies" one can identify between discourse theory and other theories, one "should not lose sight of the fact that they [will] start from different theoretical premises which involve different theoretical requirements" (p. 320). Laclau makes the point with reference to Stäheli's (2004) discussion of the analogies between discourse theory and Luhmann's systems theory. For further discussion of these theoretical and methodological questions, see Glynos and Howarth (2007).
5. While the concept cannot be explored in any detail here, my understanding of the category of the "supplement" follows Nash (2002). She argues that the "specificities of 'the social' cannot be theorized from within the terms of post-Marxism itself [indexed in terms of Butler, Laclau and Mouffe], which always already relies on an unspecified understanding of actually existing social structures and institutions, and that post-Marxism therefore needs a supplement that I call political sociology" (p. 98). She adds: "In this sense, political sociology is a dangerous supplement that marks the limits of post-Marxism as a political theory (Derrida, 1974). 'Adding' political sociology to post-Marxism is not an innocent or simple addition; it is a necessary addition that destabilizes the very terms within which the distinction between 'the social' and 'the political' is drawn" (p. 98).
6. Despite an explanatory account of class that might be interrogated by discourse theorists, Harvey's (2005) work is one reference that informs my own understanding of neoliberalism. While his analysis begins with the standard glossing of neoliberalism as a "theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced . . . within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, p. 2), Harvey is more attentive than most to the "tension between the theory of neoliberalism and the actual pragmatics

of neoliberalization" (p. 21). Unlike many critics of neoliberalism, he is also cognizant of its potency as a form of political identification, and the seductive appeals of signifiers such as "freedom" and "individualism."

7. Glynos and Howarth (2007) critically assess other methodological approaches from the perspective of what they call the "*problem of subsumption*. The latter denotes an understanding of the relationship between concepts and objects as external to each other, in which objects are gathered under concepts without the object or the concept undergoing any modification during the process of subsumption" (p. 16).
8. The distinction between these different logics is analytical, rather than ontological. The question of whether Glynos and Howarth's typology might need an additional category of "media logics" (Strömbäck, 2008) is not explored here. Nor do I consider Glynos and Howarth's useful distinction between normative and ethical critique, which distinguishes between a form of critique guided by positive prescriptions, and a mode of ethical critique that recognizes the radical contingency of social practices.
9. Meyer's (2002) argument is problematic, in some respects, because of its sharp distinction between media and political logics. Nonetheless, his discussion of how – to reformulate his analysis in field theory terms – journalistic field logics colonize political field logics is suggestive, particularly in its attention to the oppressive effects of "media time."
10. While this chapter has no space to discuss the relationship between neoliberalization and the current dislocations in media industries, I would argue that the conceptualization of media democracy articulated here transcends any old media/new media divide.
11. By "realpolitik of reason," Bourdieu (2000) emphasizes the practical need, "using the ordinary means of political action" (p. 126), to establish and protect the institutional conditions of universality.
12. Of course, there is also clear evidence of a revival of neoliberal policy prescriptions. See, for instance, Collini's (2010) analysis of the Brown report on the future of British universities.
13. Discourse theorists would qualify the practice of articulating different concepts together with an important caveat: *so long as* there is a "practice of commensuration" to render the relevant concept "compatible" with a discourse theoretical ontology (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 181).
14. The quote is taken directly from the English translation in the Wacquant essay, rather than the published translation of *Pascalian Meditations* (Bourdieu, 2000).
15. For an interpretation of the relationship between Bourdieu's work and psychoanalysis that challenges McNay's reading, see Steinmetz (2006).

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7

Post-Marx beyond Post-Marx: Autonomism and Discourse Theory

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Discourse had an easy entry but a difficult stay in Marxism. On the one hand, Marxist terms like consciousness, ideology, and culture had already provided fertile soil for discourse to take root. On the other hand, these very terms were relegated to a superstructural, even ephemeral, role in much of orthodox Marxism. The discursive turn was made possible by a crisis within Marxism itself: the failure of a certain explanatory model (the inevitability of proletarian revolution due to objective contradictions), the terrors unleashed by actually existing socialism (the USSR's Cold War global expansion, the internments, the crushing of dissent), and the eruption of struggles during 1968 (around sexual desire, gender, ethnicity, race, and everyday life). All of these contributed, over time, to a questioning of fundamental commitments and epistemological certainties within Marxism. It was, in Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) term, a "de-struction" of the history of Marxism (p. 96).

What resulted from this crisis garnered the name post-Marxism, referencing at least two tendencies: (1) the encounter of Marxism with various other "posts" (post-colonialism, post-structuralism, post-modernism); and (2) the uncertain status of this line of thought vis-à-vis its predecessors (in other words, not just existing *after* Marxism, but still in a relationship to its explanatory power).

What is discourse after post-Marxism? What are the powers of discourse that remain in the post-*Marxism* beyond *post*-Marxism?[1] In this chapter, I wish to find a fruitful role for discourse by examining an encounter between heterodox Marxisms.[2] I begin with what is often considered the pinnacle of discourse-oriented post-Marxism, the work of Ernesto Laclau (with and without Chantal Mouffe). Key components of his emphasis on discourse are discussed – that it relies primarily on semiotic and linguistic processes, begins with separation and difference,

and privileges negativity and a politics of articulation. Then I lay out some basic differences with autonomist Marxism, most notably in the work of Toni Negri.[3]

This analysis has key implications for politics. Laclau and Mouffe's laudable work in displacing the hegemonic centrality of the working class in political struggles seems to have translated into discarding any attempt to find extra-linguistic sources of power and agency. Laclau argues that, within the autonomist privileging of immanence, politics is unthinkable. As we'll see, he is presuming a particular kind of politics, namely a Gramscian conception of hegemony. Rather than situating hegemony as a particular political form, it is established as the sine qua non of politics. This, I argue, impacts the theories of collective political forms, the types of possible antagonism, and the conception of democracy. More specifically, these political commitments shape the different types of media politics that result.

But rather than evacuate discourse from any politics, I argue for discourse's residual power, namely how it underscores the contingency and constructedness of any position or action. Discourse, shorn of its overidentification with language, signification, the ontological centrality of negativity, the privileging of difference, and of social democracy/hegemony, now emerges with newfound salience.

Discourse and post-Marxism

Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* made waves in English-speaking nations after its release in 1985, with its masterful combination of deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and linguistic turns within Marxism. This ground-breaking book combined discourse and Marxism in ways that were both densely theoretical and aimed at strategic organization. But what is this concept of discourse that roiled so many waters?

Discourse, as indicated in the aforementioned book, is a "structured totality resulting from articulatory practice" (p. 105), where this articulatory practice "constitutes and organizes social relations" (p. 96). Relations are privileged here over any given (positive or essential) objects or elements – a discourse is "any complex of elements in which relations play the constitutive role" (p. 68). Discourse *constitutes* those objects via their relations and extension (p. 107).

We can see here already that discourse draws much from a structuralist approach to language. Most obvious is Saussure's famous insight that there is no positivity in language, only relations (especially relations of difference). Concerned about a Marxism that takes social relations as

"literal," Laclau and Mouffe make them analogous to a symbolic order (p. 98). In addition, developing a post-structuralist analysis, Laclau and Mouffe see any discursive system as part of polysemic, partial struggles (p. 168). The system is a partial limit of a "surplus of meaning" that subverts it (p. 111). This surplus is *constitutive* – it operates as the outside against which any identity is signified as an identity. But it simultaneously blocks identity, preventing a totality from being fully constituted and closed.

But what is this outside? The outside to any claim to positivity is a proliferation of *signifieds*. Each element in a relation is thus like an empty signifier, one that can never be fully fixed because of the surplus of signifieds (see the discussion of heterogeneity in this volume's introduction) that act as a reservoir of potential articulated elements. Signifying structures are so influential that they underpin Laclau and Mouffe's very definition of post-Marxism: "the generalization of the logic of the signifier to the ensemble of [Marxism's] theoretical categories" (p. 96). Here we see a key early characteristic of discourse, namely its rendering of social relations as derived from, or best analyzed as, signifying linguistic ones.

Laclau (with and without Mouffe) states explicitly that discourse also involves material elements. Discourses are "structured totalities articulating both linguistic and non-linguistic elements" (Laclau, 2005b, p. 13; see also Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, pp. 107–8). But this statement does not acknowledge that the very model of understanding relations and elements is already drawn from language-as-signifying practice. The symbolic, the signifier, the emphasis on difference and relationality, and the surplus of signifieds are modes of comprehension based on linguistic systems, regardless of the materiality of the elements to be comprehended. In other words, they begin with a premise that the world is structured like a language, as comprised of objects-within-discourse, and then their analysis proceeds from it.

The configuration of discourse as primarily linguistic has ramifications for thinking politics. As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) put it, the central problem entails determining the *discursive conditions* for the emergence of collective acts in the struggle against inequalities (p. 153). The discursive here is again a way of describing a system that articulates *differences*, as Laclau begins by defining struggles as particular ones. This emphasis on the particular was an important response to the fixed categories of the unified subject, of the presumption of essential, stabile identities (like classes).

How then does this dispersion of differences transform into a collective? For Laclau and Mouffe, horizontal linkages need to be constructed

because of the inherent separation of the different elements. These linkages are variously called representation, articulation, chains of equivalence, and discourse (Laclau, 2004, p. 28). The linkages are forged; they appear through an *external* force. At the very least, one of the already articulated elements takes its particularity and universalizes it by drawing upon "signs of the common" (see the discussion of "logic of the empty signifier" in this book's introduction).

Constituent power, the commons and real subsumption

Writing contemporaneously (but not being published in English until a few years after Laclau and Mouffe's landmark *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*), Antonio Negri was also working on ways of moving away from orthodox Marxism. As part of the Operaismo movement in Italy throughout the 1970s, Negri was the most public and prolific of writers associated with what is now called "autonomist Marxism" or, simply, "autonomism."

Rather than thinking of language as a signifying system that arranges objects-in-difference (the Structuralist legacy), Negri looks at language as a "circulation among expressive elements" (Casarino & Negri, 2008, p. 126). What is this expressiveness? Here we can introduce a key binary for Negri: between constituted and constituent power. A term like "constitution" needs to be bifurcated. Constituent power is an expansive field of potentialities – *potentia*: "local, immediate, actual force of constitution." Constituted power is more like *potestas*: "centralized, mediating, transcendental force of command" (Negri, 1999a; Hardt, 1991, p. xiii). Constituted power is a kind of formalization, or result, an encoding of the innovative capacities that produce it.

The closest Laclau and Mouffe come to the notion of constituent power is in their account of the surplus of meaning. This surplus is referred to as the "field of discursivity" or "heterogeneity," a horizon whose infinite set of signifieds is unable to be captured in any particular discourse. Any discourse is constituted via a *negative* surplus – a floating emptiness, an impossible suture via the proliferation of signifieds. Any articulation within a discourse is only a partial limitation of the surplus that exists in the field of discursivity. This field acts as the *condition* for any action (for example, the *making* of a discourse – the structured totality resulting from articulatory practice, p. 135). Articulation is thus an activity, but its conditions (the surplus of the field of discursivity) are not. The field is, rather, a logical set of possibles; "the necessary terrain" (p. 113).[4]

While Laclau and Mouffe note that the conditions of emergence for any object are themselves discursive, Hardt and Negri call it a power (constituent). Discourse, then, is the formal constitution and is analogous to constituted power. A discourse would also be a *symptom* of constituent power, indicating the strength or weakness of the expressive subject. When one articulatory force arises over another, which power is expressed? Why does one discourse appear and not another?[5]

Hardt and Negri do not begin analytically with a terrain comprised initially of difference and separated elements (see Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, pp. 85, 165). Given their materialist bent, they start with conditions of production. What they find is that connectivity is thoroughly organized and encouraged by capitalism. The horizontal is not a sphere of isolated particulars that need to be connected by an external, new force via chains of equivalence (cf. Laclau & Mouffe's, 1985 discussion of hegemonic articulation, especially pp. 135, 182). Rather, it is a sphere organized by capital that depends on communication, connectivity, and convergence.

Networked forms of labor and sociality comprise this terrain, one in which connectivity and sociality have been subsumed by capitalism into production processes. For Negri (2008), the "common provides a base for revealing those dimensions of immaterial and cooperative work that have been rendered objectively homogenous" (p. 65). Of course, this connectivity is ambivalent: it is both the constituted power of capital's organizing and capturing process, as well as the constituent power of living labor in cooperation and self-development. Hardt and Negri call this basin of production, the commons or commonwealth. The commons used to refer to natural resources; "the fruits of the soil, and all nature's bounty." It is also, most importantly, *a continuous power* (puissance) *and production, a capacity for transformation and cooperation"* (Negri, 2008, p. 65; emphasis added). In other words material and immaterial forces constitute the commons as a base for accumulation as well as being "a result of processes of subjectivation" (p. 65).

Hardt and Negri (2009) call the historical actor based on the commons the *multitude*, defined as a "dispositif of the organization of singularities (not difference)." Once again, surplus is key to understanding, but one that indexes a proliferation of potentials and muted actuals. Surplus *can* be a threat (negation, undermining of authorities), but it also *creates* (in the margins and as subterranean production).[6] Moreover, surplus is found in the new hybrids and monsters that emerge from such encounters (Casarino & Negri, 2008, pp. 193–218).

Their divergent understandings of surplus and difference influence their conceptions of the social order. While Laclau and Mouffe argue

that any social order fails to domesticate the field of differences, Hardt and Negri posit that the social order fails to neutralize constituent powers in the attempt to capture the development of innovative capacities. For Hardt and Negri, surplus involves the plenitude of inventive capacities whose movement not only prevents a fully sutured sign, but also augments the ability to re-produce itself. It is a creativity with autovalorizing tendencies. Yes, it has a negative dimension (capital is unable to capture fully these capacities in labor), but the power does not reside in an inert infinite set. For Laclau and Mouffe, surplus *exists* in plenitude (or, more accurately, an infinity of possible substitutions for an emptiness); it does not *act* in plenitude. It conditions actions, like articulation. We have moved from a surplus of meaning to a surplus of creation, power, and social cooperation. There are thus differing concepts of potential here: any signified potentially could be linked to a signifier. But the invention of new ones and even new modes of linkage are part of another *potentia*, the faculties of production and innovation. We are faced with two types of surplus: reactive surplus (the capacity to be articulated) and active surplus (capable of articulating, but not *only* articulating).

Laclau and Mouffe's laudable work in displacing the hegemonic centrality of the working class in political struggles seems to have translated into throwing out any attempt to find extra-linguistic sources of power and agency. A number of scholars have argued that Laclau and Mouffe reduce the social to the symbolic and linguistic (Hennessey, 1993; Johnson, 2007; Lash, 2007). Some go so far as to claim that this reduction is part of a linguistic turn that eschewed ontology for epistemology (Lash, 2007). In the historically necessary attention to epistemological uncertainty, ontology is associated with a problematic orthodox Marxism, which traffics in positivities. In dispensing with the particular naturalization of working class as the essential ground of ontology, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) work "against any general principle or substance of anthropology or inevitability of refusal" (p. 152). Subsequently, Laclau (2005a) has written on ontology and democracy in ways that provide clear differences from autonomist positions. The "primary ontological terrain," he writes, "is not one of multiplicity but of *failed unicity*" (p. 257). Primacy here is given to the negative, to antagonism as the limit of any identity, or "deficient being." Excess then has to pass through identity and negativity, which, according to Laclau, is contra the version of excess posed by Deleuze (and one presumes, Negri).

In this work, Laclau posits an ontology of lack and excess that, despite his claimed anti-Hegelianism, is essentially Hegelian in its ahistoricity.

Laclau grounds ontology (via analogy) on theological conceptions of Good and Evil (pp. 256–7). While Negri's regular invocation of Spinoza could be said to do the same, the difference is that Negri elaborates this ontology through a history primarily shaped by capitalism. Yes, it involves general anthropological capacities of transformation, overcoming, and refusal. But it is systematically grounded in an analysis of the historical accumulation of capacities and refusals. Even the more anthropological inflections of an autonomist ontology are rendered historical (for example, Dyer-Witheford, 2004; Virno, 2009). Antagonism could also be said to be ontological for Hardt and Negri, but the actors who embody it are thoroughly concrete (and thus not mere "phenomenal appearance," as Laclau accuses them of treating antagonism) (p. 257).

In addition to its ahistoricity, Laclau's ontological commitment to lack and excess is constituted around the primacy of identity (even as failed state). Ontology begins with a failure to launch identity. Failed unicity presumes a kind of an identity that is temporarily successful, but ultimately cannot hold its identity due to the antagonism posed by a surplus of meaning. This harkens back to starting with particularity in the system (only to find it can never really be itself). In attempting to negate identity by showing its impossibility, Laclau doesn't assess the material from which attempts to unify are drawn. It is a formal analysis rather than a material one.

For Hardt and Negri, non-identity is due not to a failed transcendence, but to an openness toward an exterior. Connections and interactions are primary, not the play of sameness and difference found in the limits of identity. Being is not deficient, but something like proficient or sufficient; or, in Spinozan terms, "adequate." Limits exist, not as starting points, but as interruptions and containments of the outsides *they drew from beforehand*. Ontology is not primarily a terrain comprised of difference that then finds relations through articulation, but sufficient and open interactional encounters (whose temporary stabilizations are symptoms of a will-to-make-One, a State will).

Related to their divergence around ontology is a reassessment of the role of negativity and deconstruction in political thought. For Negri (2008), the turn toward discourse was a necessary "postmodern caesura" (p. 101). The destructive force of negation was important to undermine given, metaphysical certainties in philosophy and politics. But it is only a partial step. Negri argues that we need limits to the "insurgence of the negative" (p. 154). To do this, Negri and Hardt employ the Spinozan/Baconian dual dimensions of thought, *Pars Destruens/Pars Construens*

(Read, 1999). The first is a necessary methodological step (critical and deconstructive), but making it central prevents ontological development and leads to dead-ends. Therefore it needs to be followed by the second (constructive and ethico-political) (Negri, 2008, p. 86). This does not mean banishing or excluding negativity, but situating it: diminishing its Heideggerian deathliness in order to *construct* positive Being (p. 155).

Where does construction come from? For Laclau and Mouffe, it is articulation, the linguistically based practice of making a chain of equivalence through empty signifiers. Negri's construction comes from composition, the productive process of constituent power and the common. While the discursive turn provided a much-needed de-structive sweep through seemingly settled concepts, its attention to limits rendered the constructive phase dependent on an inert logical set and reduced it to a connective practice of signifiers and signifieds.[7]

Laclau and Mouffe find external conditions, separation, and particularity everywhere at the outset. While this was important in order to displace presumed identities and totalities, it might have reached its own limit. During the time of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, real subsumption was not a primary concern, so the framework could not see how productive processes were already undermining separation and mediation. Once we assess that capitalism depends upon *overcoming* separation and requires connections, sociality, relations, and hybridity, then analytically beginning with separation is inadequate.

Language is not the constituted power of a system of articulated elements in difference, but the constituent capacities to produce innovation (even articulation) that enables "the elaboration of the social" (Casarino & Negri, 2008, p. 102; see also p. 127). Are there moments of structured difference? Of course, but these moments do not characterize the given system or terrain, but are a result of dynamic forces in conflict.

The problem and particularity of hegemony

For any Marxism, post- or otherwise, the political effectiveness of an analytic tool determines its worth. Laclau and Negri consistently foreground the problem of collective decision-making; they even share the concept of radical democracy. Both, ultimately, are concerned with the political moment. But Laclau does not see it that way. In replying to *Empire*, Laclau (2004) states that, within Hardt and Negri's social and ontological model, "politics becomes unthinkable" (p. 22).

Of course, this hyperbolic statement is empirically untrue: Hardt and Negri devote much writing to rendering the political conceivable and practicable.[8] Something else must therefore be going on in Laclau's statement. I want to argue that he is defending a *particular* kind of politics, one that in the autonomist framework is no longer workable or desirable. This type is defined by its attachment to Gramscian hegemony, mediation (including party representation), and a focus on the juridical sphere. This model of politics requires an external force that articulates demands upon constituted power (the State). But to make this clearer we need to spend more time on Laclau's elaborated argument.

Laclau's (2005b) response to *Empire* is titled "Can Immanence Explain Social Struggles?" His answer, of course, is no. He accuses Hardt and Negri of abandoning the political project via a mystification. He highlights their examples of "vertical struggles" as isolated and separated, without horizontal linkages. In a later work he makes similar points and says their "immanentism requires a universal historical actor," but that this universality exists without political construction and unity is "a gift from heaven" (pp. 240–1). Articulation is left to God or Nature. Hardt and Negri thus cannot explain the passage that would comprise a revolutionary break. This is, for Laclau, a "total eclipse of politics" (p. 242). Instead of immanence, politics requires an articulation based on a "failed transcendence," an absent presence, and a constitutive lack (referring again to the surplus of signification).

Laclau imputes to Hardt and Negri necessary conditions for politics that they do not accept, and then finds the authors lacking when they don't produce. For one thing, it's not clear why immanence requires, in Laclau's view, a *universal* historical actor? Does any attempt to locate mechanisms for collective action necessitate a commitment to universality? They are not fond of the term "unity" either. Rather than operate with the classic political project of turning the Many into One, the autonomist project is to make a Many out of One (that One being the State's unity) (Virno, 2004, p. 42). Although Hardt and Negri do not spell out in detail what those mechanisms are, this does not mean they have abandoned a political construction of the subject. On numerous occasions they mention that the political process is precisely their project and major challenge (see, for example, the second half of *Multitude*).[9] But they add that what is also needed is a *subjective construction of the political*, namely the processes of subjectivation in the biopolitical terrain that are capable of taking on political projects (see more on the importance of subjectivity below).

Laclau could have said the autonomist type of politics is undesirable, impractical, self-defeating, or difficult. But instead he says that politics

are eclipsed, even *unthinkable*, as if it presents an insurmountable limit. Laclau turns difference with Negri into a negation, perhaps even an antagonism, due to his equation of politics with hegemony. Yet it is Laclau who desires universality, once again because of an analytical starting point of isolated struggles. Richard Day (2006) notes that the Hegelian framework of Laclau's politics involves universalizing a particular social force's objectives and interests (articulation within and via chains of equivalence). In Laclau's (2005c) recent discussion of populism this becomes clear: "a section within the community will present itself as the expression and representation of the community as a whole . . . a certain particularity which assumes a function of universal representation" (pp. 110–11). Thus, while the discursive turn worked to displace universals from their conceptual reign, something of their character remains. We move from anti-universals to *universalizing* a particular as hegemonic.

The desire for universalized historical subjects is unsurprising, given Laclau and Mouffe's adherence to a particular notion of politics, one named in the title of their famous book – hegemony. They make the following two-part claim: (1) construction is a problem of politics; and (2) there is no politics without hegemony (p. 151). While the first statement is shared with autonomism, the second is not. But the second determines how we are to think of the first. Political construction equals articulation, specifically one that universalizes a particular set of struggles. The constellation of concepts proposed by Laclau and Mouffe (articulation, discourse, elements, moments, dispersion, antagonism) are all arranged *within* a discourse, namely a Gramscian conception of hegemony. In other words, hegemony is situated as a particular political form rather than the *sine qua non* of politics.

Negri's response to Laclau and Mouffe's work is brief and dismissive. He claims they empty Gramsci of any revolutionary potential and turn him "into a hero of juridical realism" by equating hegemony to "expanded social consensus" (Casarino & Negri, 2008, p. 163). Moreover, Negri finds *any* Gramscian political project to be questionable. While Negri finds value in his analysis of fascism, Gramsci is less helpful in revolutionary politics (p. 164). Negri makes his difference clear when he says, "hegemony is not a concept of the multitude" (p. 165).

Why doesn't hegemony work for autonomism? For some of the reasons already noted. For one thing, the hegemonic strategy of the Left means, "constructing articulations on the basis of *separate* struggles" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, pp. 176–8; italics added). More importantly, Gramscian hegemony depends upon a presumed separate sphere for the

political. This could be found in such Gramscian commitments as the "long march through institutions," and defining civil society as a relatively coherent, even autonomous sphere for politics. The autonomist real subsumption thesis would not hold this distinction. As Nicholas Thoburn (2007) puts it, the "social factory challenges hegemony" (p. 80). Michael Hardt (1995), following Foucault and Deleuze, argues that disciplinary and control mechanisms have swarmed through the social, creating a "post-civil society." The spheres where political articulation could take place are not open ones, but densely constructed via power relations and subjectifying processes.

Moreover, hegemonic politics primarily involve a juridical and representational politics, even a version of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" (2008, pp. 114–15; Casarino & Negri, 2008, pp. 163–5). These mechanisms of constitution involve or address the State and other mediating mechanisms (especially the political party), even taking over State institutions. Autonomist organizing consistently eschews party and State politics, preferring self-organized, immanent mechanisms.

For their part, Laclau and Mouffe argue in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* that hegemonic politics are not restricted to making demands or to State-oriented directions. Hegemonic articulation is "a type of action whose objective is the transformation of social relations," especially targeting a change for the subject-in-subordination (p. 153). I will discuss this subjectivity further later, but suffice it for now to note that most of their examples are historically State-bound, or at least ones of *constituted* power (a constitutional discourse as a resource for demands). Their politics focuses *primarily* on rights and demands (freedom, equality) to be expanded as democratic within constituted forms. At the very least, they note that there are occasions where party mediation can function as "the organizer of dispersed and politically virgin masses" (p. 180). But this is not just one avenue among others, in a plurality of tactics. Given its hegemonic history, the tendency towards mediation by party and State overruns others when given such an opening. By providing a space for it, Laclau and Mouffe inadvertently privilege it.

Discourse's role and function thus depends on a priori *political* commitments, not just epistemological ones. The constellation of concepts in Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism, including discourse, operate in the service of particular political forms (hegemony, mediation, party, constituted power, the State). Their key contribution to cultural studies, I argue, is a compelling analysis of how populism's radical democratic potential can be turned into authoritarian expressions (such as in the notion of authoritarian populism, and other examinations of Left and Right

populism in cultural studies' uptake). But, as for political proposals, according to Negri (2008), their use of discourse is limited by the adherence to hegemony (p. 154). It is a "weak thought that emerges out of socialism's crisis and attempted redemption," but that ultimately falls short in its adequacy to new conditions for political action (p. 80).

Due to spatial constraints, there is no room here to elaborate on what autonomists offer to political struggles in general. We can note that the basis would be the common, the basin of production, as organized cooperation via immaterial and affective labor. It begins with a material convergence, diminishing signification in favor of communication, affect, and information (Thoburn, 2007; Negri, 1999b; Terranova, 2004). It emphasizes decision-making and organizational composition. How a common makes a decision is different from how a dispersion of positions is articulated together. For Hardt and Negri this collective is still constructed, but it is based on already-existing linkages within productive processes.[10] Can there be a common without articulation? Not necessarily, but the point here is that the common is not *constituted* by and through articulation or a form of representation.

One way to see the difference between a political form based on language-derived articulations and one based on common powers is to examine their respective conceptualizations of democracy. While all agree that democracy is a viable and vital concept, each has different conception of its history and substance. For Laclau and Mouffe (1985), the democratic revolution is the terrain upon which to form a general political will. It is a discourse whose elements (concepts like freedom and equality) are the most important available signifiers for appropriation and rearticulation. As has been noted, this strategy is built on deepening and expanding constituted power (now called radical and plural democracy). Hardt and Negri note that democratic discourse *is* available and in circulation but is subsumed.

The divergence happens when the *source* of democracy is named. For Laclau and Mouffe, autoconstitution becomes democratic, and not just pluralist, when it results from an egalitarian *imaginary*. Once again, democracy-as-discourse is a rhetorical resource, comprised of concepts that can connect separated "*autos*" originating in isolated sources of validation. The *auto-* for autonomists, however, resides in immanent ontological powers that are increasingly "communized." Material common production (connectivity through labor and communication) means that the democratic quality is a resource held in common production rather than articulated in the imaginary or in a rhetorical praxis that seeks to overcome apparent separations.

The politics of antagonism

Antagonism for Laclau and Mouffe (1985) follows from their notion of discursivity, the excess of meaning that prevents any identity from sealing itself. Antagonism expresses the inability to be enclosed, a matter of non-identity in which A cannot equal A because of the haunting of the Outside/Other. This unsettling deconstructive effect comes again in the form of noise, of an unlimited potential of substitutions that act to negate any positivity.

Laclau's articulation of subject positions and their imaginaries counters what he sees as Hardt and Negri's "spontaneity" (p. 26) due to their focus on vertical struggles. Laclau opposes to this spontaneity, deriving from Nature or God, a politics involving a "complex social construction that has conditions of possibility *external* to it" (p. 26). This construction requires "set of subjective transformations" to move from defining the relation one is in from subordination to oppression and then to domination (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 153).

These subjective transformations take place in and through an articulatory discourse that will depend on an empty signifier "democracy." Changes in discourse are primarily changes in terminology and in ways of thinking, imagining, and understanding (pp. 153–6). Discourse exists as part of what the Left needs to articulate, an "imaginary," even a utopian one (pp. 155, 190). Discourse thus has a primarily pedagogical function. It is an articulated system of signs that links previous separated and isolated struggles.

For Negri, too, there is no fixed identity of antagonists. Capital/labor is a relation among forces, each of which has tendencies and directions that converge and diverge. Antagonism is not a structural impossibility, but a dynamic *between* forces: capital diverts and captures living labor's constituent power, while pre-empting other paths of self-development. The antagonism of logical impossibility (via discourse) is not rich or supple enough to explain the range of antagonistic processes here. Antagonism for Negri refers here again to a process of becoming (the ontological foundation itself is antagonism) rather than negation (there is *no* center or foundation due to surplus). And, contra Laclau's accusation, this antagonistic difference is not natural or God-given, but thoroughly historical (Negri, 2005, 2008). While Negri does posit, via Spinoza, ontological forces, they do not transcend the history of capitalism. Negri (2005) defines this antagonism as one that, over time, increases insofar as there are *accumulations* of mechanisms that define its subjective force.

Autonomists do not focus on a mode of production that defines capitalism as a structure, a regime of accumulation, or a law of value creation.

Rather, the autonomist hypothesis posits that capitalism is primarily a relationship (capital and labor) defined by subjective antagonism. These subjects, according to Negri, aren't substantialist beings, but mechanisms and *agencements*. On the one side, capital's instruments of command, exploitation, and discipline. On the other, the history of struggles, refusals, and creative powers that comprise living labor. There is, in the history of capital's exploitation, a "continuity of antagonistic expression" and the "coherence of an assemblage" by living labor that spurs capital on to rearrange its value-measuring instruments as well as its disciplinary impositions (Negri, 2005).

Thus, while the two strains share a commitment to the primacy of antagonism, the status and substance of it remains divergent. For Laclau it is a logic, for Negri a historical accumulation of mechanisms of subjectivity. For Laclau (1990), antagonism is not established *within* capitalist relations of production, but *between* the latter and the identity of the social agents – workers included – outside of them. Hardt and Negri see antagonism within capitalism, as defined by capital/labor relations in their genesis and history. It is not a separation between structure and its outside, but an "internal" split among accumulations of subjectivity that ruptures the totality of capitalism. In addition, the antagonism is "within" capitalism due to real subsumption, which now extends exploitation and thus antagonism into numerous social spaces and practices. Yes, antagonism now includes many social agents and relations as Laclau and Mouffe posit, but this is a diffusion through the social. Multiplicity is not exterior, but immanent.

But what are these subjective mechanisms that accumulate? How do they compare to Laclau's call for a subject that needs to revolt, an antagonistic subject? Subjectivity is crucial for Hardt and Negri (2004) as they too seek the conditions under which a subject is capable of revolt and incapable of taking command (Casarino & Negri, 2008; Negri, 1999b). But, as might be expected, subjectivity is not composed in and through the discursive channels proffered by Laclau. With real subsumption, the conditions of making subjects are not external but immanent. The identities that Laclau and Mouffe recognize as part of the expansion of subjective rights are now *also* economic. Difference (as raced, gendered, sexualized, and so on) exists as a source of economic value, and not just potential for radical democracy.

This is how ambivalence becomes antagonism: not via a discursive appeal to democracy (constituted freedom, equality), but in the material, ethical relations of subjectivity. While there might be no total structure called "society," as famously argued by Laclau and Mouffe, there is a social dimension of subjective production from which politics as the formation of antagonistic collective directions are forged.[11]

In sum, Laclau sees many lacks in Hardt and Negri: a totality, a universal historical actor, and a theory of articulation, without which politics is unthinkable. Hardt and Negri's concept of *general will* coincides with being communist, according to Laclau, and therefore no representation is needed, which means no politics are possible (a politics that presupposes antagonism and hegemony) (Laclau, 2004).

While Hardt and Negri note the importance of a collective action, it need not take the form of a political will to be elaborated via discursive articulation. Ontological plus ethical composition (the cultivation of subjectivity) is the process leading toward a political form. Negri claims that what is required now is a "new communist patristics," "a constructive phase in which formalized desires are reassembled on the global scale" (Casarino & Negri, 2008, p. 107). Ultimately, what is needed is a practical experiment in making the multitude. Hardt and Negri (2000) cite the crucial historical event of the Paris commune for Marx's theoretical development (p. 206). What similar political practice produces the multitude? Hardt and Negri list a number of concrete actions that act as laboratories for experiments in these forms: World Social Forum, ATTAC, and Creative Commons. In any event, political forms of antagonistic subjectivity, of the conditions for revolt and being-in-common are practical matters – they are not "unthinkable" but also will not be fleshed out *in thought*.

Laclau makes his own political commitments the sine qua non of politics, and even seemingly sufficient, so when those commitments are diminished in others it is seen as a fatal flaw. Rather than depicted as a different commitment, or as an obstacle to be overcome in an act of common power, autonomist politics get articulated as *unthinkable*, introducing an impasse through the power of nothing, of the limit. Discourse in this "hegemony of hegemony" framework is a form of constituted power, a politics that works on the terrain of codified and organized systems (in this case, of difference). Like their predecessors (Arendt, Schmitt, Gramsci), Laclau and Mouffe reduce constituent power to constituted power. This in itself is not a problem, as long as it is situated in its place and no longer tries to occupy a *centrality* to political forms. When elevated to the necessary condition for the "thinkability" of politics, then we have encountered a blockage.

Media politics

Both strains of heterodox Marxism stress the importance of cultivating political subjectivity. And where does this take place? One site, of course,

is media culture. In this section, I explore how these versions of Marxism give us different ways of thinking of media politics.

A discursive media politics gives important analytic tools for understanding representational politics' media strategies. A key contribution by Laclau and Mouffe, as mentioned, was the ability to understand how populism's potential for radical democracy was taken up the Right to make an "authoritarian popular." This legacy of Gramscian analysis made sense of the 1980s rise of Thatcher and Reagan, and has import today. The ability of the Right to form an anti-democratic popular frontier is an astute understanding of today's US media politics, especially with the rise of the Tea Party movement and its amplification/co-constitution with media outlets, including prominent bloggers and Fox News. We are witnessing a media-fueled right-wing counter-hegemonic (or restorative hegemonic) collective political action, a networked populism (Bratich, 2010). Identification and articulation processes are key to this authoritarian populism (especially within nationalist and religious imaginaries). The Tea Party is aware of this populist history, evidenced in the t-shirt slogan, "Proud to be member of the Mob."

Counter-hegemonic discourse analysis not only provides insights into media strategies, but also resonates with some contemporary political projects. One version of counter-hegemonic politics calls for increased representation and recognition of particular positions with their own source of validity (the post-68 legacy of new social movements). In the quarter-century since the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, social identities have seen an increase in visibility, though of course the politics of these appearances are highly contested. While the struggles over and through representation and visibility have opened significant avenues for a diversity of subjectivities, capitalism shapes the terrain in which identities express themselves. When visibility turns into a lifestyle commodity choice and other individualizing solutions, the struggles' articulation is severely limited.

Another media politics resulting from counter-hegemonic strategies can be found in projects that seek to distribute media resources more equitably under the banner of democracy. In the US, the Media Reform movement is the exemplar here. Their mission is to contest the private ownership and restrictive distribution of media (like bandwidth and technological development). Media Reform raises awareness and seeks to articulate a variety of positions in the name of freedom, equality, and justice. The means for seeking these goals involve making arguments and demands on the State, specifically the Federal Communications Commission. At times, temporary alliances are formed with Christian conservatives for specific campaigns.

Media Reform seeks wider representation of subjective interests and expressions as well as different modes of ownership and distribution. Of course, there is much to be lauded here, not the least of which is the ability of Media Reform to disturb State control in such a way that creates spaces for minoritarian practices to swarm in and increase their proliferation. However, these strategies are controversial. Some of the minoritarian practices that have allied with Media Reform found their anti-authoritarian, anti-Statist autonomous media practices rubbing up against more juridical-oriented counter-hegemonic actions. Media Reform, it could be said, draws its power and legitimacy from constituent power with the goal of replacing and forming a new constituted power with(in) the State.

But this is not the only way media politics are thinkable. One can recognize the hegemonizing of cultural practices while accentuating the self-constituting, autonomous history of radical media. This rich history and densely woven present is filled with creative self-generative media practices that are not merely exterior noise to a dominant media bloc.[12] The research on radical media, alternative media, and social movement media (Atkinson & Dougherty, 2006; Coopman, 2004; Dunbar-Hester, 2009; Juris, 2005; Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Kidd, 2003; Pickard, 2006; Piepmeier, 2009) gives us ways to understand the present as comprised of numerous "do-it-yourself" media projects that seek to contest official modes of expression while also cultivating a kind of communication biopower (Terranova 2004). These media projects, from print zines to software coding, belong to what Richard Day (2006) calls the newest social movements: counter-globalization actions, anarchist affinity group projects, open source activists, community wireless, low-power FM, DIY health, and affective support networks. The social movement media research demonstrates that these are really not separate media activism projects – they are *emergent* ones.[13] They arise from a milieu of social movements that infuses any individuated project *from the outset*. These projects don't always agree or even communicate with each other, but neither are they isolated "vertical struggles." The research done on these projects adds to the milieu by making links and creating autovalorizing feedback loops.[14] Far from an "eclipse" of media politics, we see here the compositional communication required for the creation of new political forms.

The work on information commons in a digital age also points to self-valorizing tendencies (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter 2009). Digital and social media have been analyzed as immaterial and affective labor, starting from a premise of highly connected sociality (as free value producer for capital) in order to understand potential forms of contestation

(Andrejevic, 2008; Cote & Pybus, 2007; Scholz, 2007; Terranova, 2000, 2004). Autonomist media politics has an even earlier example – the Radio Alice experiments in Italy in the late 1970s.[15] This project took radio and made it a horizontal (or, more accurately, transversal) medium, absorbing the technology into street actions and aesthetic experiments as a mode of composing those very movements. Franco Bifo Berardi, a participant in Radio Alice, has written extensively on what might be called media composition (Berardi, Jacquemet & Vitali, 2009). Berardi (2009) elsewhere writes about the "decompositional" quality of media culture: the constant reactivity to information overloads, the enervation of subjectivity, and the networked modes of alienation.

Media politics, for both strains of Marxism, involve a "set of subjective transformations" (Laclau, 2004, p. 28). For Laclau and Mouffe, this is a hegemonic struggle over subject positions articulated via an empty signifier like democracy. It is most likely elaborated through articulation wars over populism in news media outlets (Tea Party, Fox News) or through demands made upon the State (Media Reform). This is a Gramscian remnant of the long march through institutions: gain control, make articulations, and expand democracy. Autonomist media politics operate by experimenting with new modes of expressive media culture. Media culture provides platforms where bodies and capacities mingle to enhance or deplete their own potential (for example, in online social networks as value-producers). Media culture is a dense site where new regimes of affect, labor, and control are elaborated. How do mediated forms amplify or interfere with the expression and affirmation of power (capacity and ethics)? Here, in the basin of production, ontological composition takes place via experiments in metamorphoses. New subjective processes can enter into connections with others to produce common strength, but they can also be sites of decomposition, diminishing subjective potentials and common bodies.

Conclusion: Returning gifts

Post-Marxism is not just Marxism after the discursive turn. It also means post-Marxism itself is discursive, and thus contingent and historical. While autonomists have seemingly abandoned the term "discourse," they could benefit from the concept's gifts. Discourse, shorn of its privileging of language, signification, the centrality of negativity and difference, and the politics of social democracy/hegemony, now emerges with newfound salience. Discourse's residual power is the way it underscores the contingency and constructedness of any position

or action. In other words, discourse can still remind us that common projects have a *tendency* toward closure, founded on a gap, an exclusion, an Other. Mechanisms of decision-making for a multitude will involve processes that will leave remainders. In the passage from constituent to constituted power, in the construction of enemy and affinities, what is abandoned and forgotten? Any democratic constitution based on a common power or multitude still needs to care for the (now decentralized) limits and exclusions. It is crucial to attend to blind spots at the very moment of "and . . . and . . . and." Discourse based on signifying systems gives an important first step in understanding these processes, but remains thin. Reviving other streams in the discursive turn would help (e.g. psychoanalytic discoveries of repression and the abject, and anthropological work on projection and scapegoating).

This way, limits can still become part of recomposition without an insurgence of negativity that would lead to decomposition. We find a new place for the negative – no longer as limit to what can be done, but as the forgotten and excluded. Otherwise, there will be a stronger temptation for any constitution to become a project of mastery and banishment. What is called for is a constant working-through of the limit, to not forget the forgetting. We can point to examples here. Within autonomist Marxism, the fixation on waged productive labor processes has produced a persistent recurrence of forgetfulness, specifically the marginalization and exclusion of social reproduction, care work, and women's work from the analysis (Dalla Costa & James, 1972; Del Re, 1996; Federici, 2010; Fortunati, 2007).

Within media politics we can also see how discourse can shed light on these exclusions. The history of Indymedia and other radical media projects demonstrate a recurring pattern – the tendency within emergent projects to begin with a claim to openness and connective production, while eventually becoming increasingly closed or narrowed (see Pickard, 2006). Organizational processes establish positions for agency, involve the arrangement of resources, and determine rules as well as the decision-making processes about those rules. Social forums, independent media platforms, and consensus-based affinity groups all necessarily discriminate – they require selections, pathways, entrances, and blocks. They manage and distribute personalities, ideologies, affects, and types of attachments.

Discourse can help here with these immanent constructions by prompting us to ask *how* immanent or external are mechanisms of decision-making. Discourse here can stress contingency in order to prevent the overaccumulation of authority and power in a media project. It is, in

many respects, discourse *against* hegemony, pre-empting the tendency of any particular to claim universal status.

Discourse's focus on the transience of any position or claim has another implication: positions can be appropriated by all kinds of forces, including those considered "enemies." As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) argue so well, struggles are partial and polysemic and thus can be appropriated by the Right. Populism, for instance, is a type of discursive politics residing in the processes of becoming-multitude. A multitude might provide a conceptual and practical bulwark against identity-accumulation, but it will also struggle against its own tendencies toward a becoming-people. Discourse reminds us of these residual tendencies, of those forces that would restore, *in the name of the multitude*, its opposite.

These gifts from discourse, attending to remainders and reversals, are tied to one legacy of Marxist discourse, namely paying heed to *opaqueness* (Laclau, 1990, p. 94). What happens to the shadows in and of ontology? Discourse, now a thoroughly post-Marxist one, operates to remind us that, alongside the sunlight of Being exists the nightside of transformation. In Derridean (1994) terms, every ontology is a *hauntology*. As ghosts, the negative is no longer fixated on the time of the end, of death, but transmutes into something else. Discourse after post-Marxism allows us to recognize these ambivalences, the proximity of the worst, and the inability to banish once and for all negativity as such. In so doing, common powers learn from history and can liberate themselves from the patterns of self-defeat.

Notes

1. Of course, this encounter exists *within* a discourse, the discourse of Marxism. In addition to their shared discursive frame, post- and autonomist Marxism also share its crisis. Both take seriously the failure of classical Marxism to make sense of capitalism's maneuvers or to produce a viable revolutionary project. They both work from the rupture called "the thought of '68." Both are committed to a notion of radical democracy, to the development of a collective political subject, and to conceptualize the organizational passage toward revolutionary action. Both seek to push analysis beyond a fundamental dialectic or contradiction, beyond the necessity of objective history, and beyond the centrality of party mediations (though as we'll see they do this to different degrees). But their differences matter.
2. Others have written extensively and thoroughly on the impact of Post-Marxism, especially Laclau and Mouffe's germinal work, on cultural studies (Goldstein, 2005) as well as the autonomist departure from it (Thoburn, 2007).

3. The focus of this chapter should be clarified here. It is not a critique of the whole of discourse theory nor of all uses of discourse (which is highly contested anyway). Moreover, while the chapter primarily draws upon the work of Laclau and Mouffe, it is done so not to render judgment on their oeuvre. Like all authorial discursive production, theirs develops diachronically and, taken synchronically, is rife with contradictions. Rather, it is to highlight their crucial influence within cultural studies as the convergence of post-structuralism and marxism. As Nicholas Thoburn (2007, p. 89) puts it in his assessment of Laclau and Mouffe's importance, there were various uptakes of their work, but hegemony functioned "as a guiding principle for the political project and approach to the problem of power of a good deal of cultural studies." The following analysis will thus be selective insofar as what is at stake is a series of textual and discursive effects (especially regarding Marxist analysis), and not the entire body of discourse theory or its key figures.
4. Perhaps discourse itself, by finding its conditions outside of itself (in the field of discursivity), can be assessed as a reactive rather than an active force. More work would need to be done to elaborate this claim.
5. One route this has taken in recent communication studies is to think of discourse itself as a type of labor (see Greene, 2004).
6. Following this line of thinking, Shukaitis (2009) focuses on the historical role of what he calls "Imaginal Machines." Imagination doesn't just articulate but affects, moves, composes, innovates, and produces a surplus (that then is reabsorbed by the creative powers).
7. While Laclau and Mouffe have come around lately to incorporating the "affective turn" in their thought, it is beyond the scope of this argument to compare their uses of passions and affects with those routinely employed by autonomists.
8. Laclau could be given a pass on this hyperbole, as he is solely looking at *Empire*. However, in his recent book *On Populist Reason*, he repeats some of these same claims, despite the publication of *Multitude* and numerous writings by Negri on the question of decision-making.
9. Laclau (2005b) mentions Hardt and Negri's political project but only near the end of his chapter. Laclau fixates on a minor part of their argument (about vertical struggles) throughout rather than other claims about decision-making (until the very end of his chapter).
10. Here too we need to note that capital does not only organize and compose relations, it *decomposes* them. Decomposition is an intervention, a disruption of Being. Still, one does not *begin* with a terrain of particulars, but a dynamic of material processes (composition/decomposition) and the conflict of powers.
11. Others, like Cesare Casarino and Richard Day, prefer to examine the composition of subjectivity via "elective affinities" and the "politics of affinity," respectively.
12. Hardt and Negri (2000), unfortunately, tend to reduce media to a fear-inducing spectacle while occasionally pointing to Indymedia and other media projects (pp. 322–3). They are primarily referring to corporate journalism, and not popular culture more broadly speaking. When they do talk about alternative media, they think of it more as an information-communication technology issue.

13. Social movement research does resonate with certain kinds of post-Marxist projects, for instance the kind found in Dahlberg (2007). He notes that there are ways to bypass the tendency towards fears of "fragmentation" by foregrounding discursive contestation as a way of engaging the public sphere.
14. Research is not only of the academic type – see the movement research in recurring outlets such as *Turbulence, Perspectives, Journal of Aesthetics and Protest, Area,* collections such as *An Atlas*, *Uses of a Whirlwind* and events such as Renewing the Anarchist Tradition, the World Social Forum and other national and regional forums.
15. John Downing's (2001) germinal work on radical media, while not explicitly citing autonomism, does much to recognize the autovalorization of marginal media. John Duda (2010) makes a compelling case that C.L.R James' newsletter was a participatory medium that can be thought of as blogging in the 1950s.

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8

Multiplicity, Autonomy, New Media, and the Networked Politics of New Social Movements

Natalie Fenton

Introduction

A contemporary politics of contestation and dissent is linked to the development of what have been termed new social movements (NSMs).[1] This chapter discusses key aspects of discourse theory in relation to studies of the Internet and the mediation of political identities in the politics of NSMs. These have grown out of a complex social and political history – a history in which politics itself has shifted from a traditional focus on institutions processed via organized systems to a concern with more disparate social movement alignments. This shift has challenged traditional forms of political representation and articulation within the public realm while responding to the changed social, political, and technological conditions and circumstances under which political citizenship is enacted. Contemporary transnational social movements are a combination of collective action and individual subjectivities that mix personal expressions of political allegiance with public debate in an online context. The spaces of action and debate have shifted from local/national configurations and terrestrial media to "global" counter-summits and the Internet (although the latter does not exclude the former). One of the striking differences between the counter-publicity of transnational social movements and the counter-politics of the nation-state is the lack of a common identity and rejection of unifying meta-narratives of organization. NSMs are characterized by their multiplicity as a movement of movements, a network of networks, a politics of non-representation, affect, and antagonism. Each NSM includes a multiplicity of experiences that are themselves often hybrid, contradictory, and contingent. The differences within and between movements are intrinsic to understanding their vibrancy and speak to the possibilities of a radical plural

democracy with a multiplicity of subject positions favoured by several discourse theorists (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

This multiplicity is also inflected by another concept – autonomy – that is, the principle that no one speaks for the collective, that each takes control of their own political activism. The rise of the notion of autonomy for communicative subjects in the digital age is at the heart of the networked politics of new social movements. Through addressing the political issues raised by the multiplicity of voices in transnational mediated spaces and the rejection of meta-narratives of political ideas in favor of autonomous political subjects and values, this chapter discusses how these key characteristics of the networked politics of NSMs play out in critical differences between discourse theoretical and autononomist/Deleuzian traditions, particularly as they relate to the concepts of (political) representation and hegemony. In applying these theories to the mediated politics of new social movements, this chapter offers an appreciation of how, when viewed through the lens of post-Marxist discourse theory, the concept of multiplicity may progress the agonistic dimensions of a non-essentialist politics and that of autonomy may signal a break from dominant structures and understandings of power in a post-hegemonic frame. However, both run the risk of being translated into either a liberal tolerance of difference that in fact prevents substantive questions from being asked, or an anarchic, autonomous, and ultimately individualistic politics that prevents substantive change from happening.

Multiplicity and the mediated politics of new social movements

In the digital age, the Internet has become central to an understanding of the contemporary representation and articulation of contestatory political identities and forms of political mobilization. Not only have the spaces for political engagement expanded in a digital mediascape, but our orientation toward them has changed too. Many argue that the meta-narratives of a politics of old that were organized around unifying ideologies such as socialism and communism are being replaced with a type of post-foundational politics (Marchart, 2007) that corresponds to the hybridity, reflexivity, mobility, and performativity that is characteristic of "networked society" (Dean, Anderson, & Lovink, 2006). A post-foundational politics is critical of those who view the field of political practices as separate from culture and the economy, arguing instead that networked technologies accelerate, intensify, and hybridize political, cultural, and economic practices to configure and produce new political

spaces and opportunities, producing assemblages of power in often unpredictable ways (Terranova, 2004). These approaches capture the mood and essence of radical politics in a digital age and have the notion of multiplicity at their core.

Post-Marxist discourse theory is central to an understanding of this multiplicity in terms of the politics espoused by and the mediation of NSMs. In particular, the anti-essentialism made popular by *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) challenged the notion that there was any such thing as an absolute, objective reality to social and political identities. Rather, they argued, that these identities were always contingent upon the outcome of political struggles. Unitary identities such as the worker or woman came to be seen as positions within discourse that were provisional and based upon their ever-shifting relationships with other identities. In this manner, they were seen to provide a framework for understanding the faltering development of traditional political identities post-1968 and the experience of the emergence of NSMs alongside the decline of organized labour and the forms of socialism associated with it (Nash, 2000).

The multiplicity of NSMs is manifest in the range of issues embodied within and between movements and is linked to the relative informality of such networks of action compared to traditional party politics. NSMs exhibit a politics that has grown out of a fragmentation of political culture fueled by the rise of an identity politics that recognizes diversity and allows for differentiated notions of citizenship among diverse counter-publics. It is a politics defined by the multiple, shifting, and overlapping meanings attributed to certain identities and the various struggles to define them. As such, NSMs can arguably be seen as the closest realisation of Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) formulation of politics and political identities that we have seen to date. Just as post-Marxist discourse theorists proposed, because no single identity and no social situation endure forever, we no longer need be beholden to a revolutionary politics of the past. Rather, many types of political activity are possible including coalitions of diverse groups and individuals.

However, the multiplicity and politics of NSMs can also be seen as the realization of other post-Marxist theories, particularly Deleuzian inspired "post-hegemony" theory (including that of autonomist Marxists). NSMs are usually non-hierarchical, with open protocols, open communication, and self-generating information and identities. Their networks are often staunchly anti-bureaucratic and anti-centralist, suspicious of large organized, institutional politics. The politics in practice in these movements is highly porous and more organic than the politics of old and

operates horizontally rather than vertically (Tormey, 2006), creating networks of resistance. Consequently, they are characterized by phases of visibility and phases of relative invisibility with people moving frequently within and between them, as they come in and out of focus with a persistent refusal to subsume the multiplicity at their core into one overarching political identity.

Both discourse and Deleuzian/autonomist Marxist theory are relevant to the terms of *mediation* of this contemporary politics. The advent of the Internet and the re-structuring of capitalism have fundamentally altered the mediation of transnational political action with information and communication technologies becoming crucial tools of political opposition (Castells, 1997). The Internet is claimed to facilitate international communication among NSMs, and allows protesters to respond on an international level to local events while requiring minimal resources and bureaucracy. It is also claimed that the Internet is more than an organizing tool. It is seen as an organizing model for a new form of political protest that is international and decentralized, with diverse interests but common targets (Salter, 2003) – although these targets are perpetually contested. The nature of the politics exhibited on-line by NSMs is marked by protest rather than by a positive political project, thereby allowing potential differences in political ideologies to be sidelined in favor of the inclusivity of the importance of protest and struggle. This is nothing new – social movements have always been at the forefront of protest and demonstration. What is unprecedented is that with the help of technology, this is now happening on a transnational basis and at high speed, resulting in ever more complex networks of oppositional activism.

The large, decentralized and often leaderless networks of NSMs facilitated by new communication technologies operate a form of politics that is based on the participation of all, rather than the hierarchical model of traditional representative politics. This reflects a further emphasis on participative decision-making and the demand for concentrations of power to be broken down (Gilbert, 2008). The act of participation itself, and engagement with a particular issue, is often asserted as the political purpose rather than social reform or direct policy impact. This speaks to a generic post-Marxism that embraces radical contingency: a non-fixed and non-essentialist politics in which identity and community arises out of political participation. Tarrow and della Porta (2005, p. 237) refer to the interconnections between online and offline participation as "rooted cosmopolitans" (people and groups rooted in specific national contexts but involved in transnational networks of contacts and conflicts); "multiple

belongings" (activists with overlapping memberships linked with polycentric networks); and "flexible identities" (characterized by inclusiveness and a positive emphasis on diversity and cross-fertilization). Despite the variability and fluidity at the heart of these movements that embrace difference, they are still founded on a level of commonality, even if this does not bear the class/labor strictures of a solidarity of old. Participants in these movements are drawn together by common elements in their value systems and political understandings – though this can be capricious and liable to frequent change (della Porta & Diani, 1999; Keck & Sikkink, 1998). This is a politics that makes a virtue out of a "solidarity" built on the value of difference that goes beyond a simple respect and involves an inclusive politics of voice.

The notion of multiplicity in relation to NSMs and their online manifestations refers to the content and the cast of politics. The space of new media enables a broader range of voices and types of material to be communicated to a wider audience without the constraints of needing to comply with or follow a particular political creed or direction other than the expression of an affinity with a particular cause. Tormey (2006) refers to this, drawing on Deleuze, as a rhizomatic form of politics that has no single center and can spread indefinitely:

> "Horizontality" is from this point of view not a question of joining a party, but of dissolving the axiomatic of parties in the quest for combinations that fully express the availability of autonomy and authentic modes of univocal engagement with and alongside others. . . . Horizontalist strategies . . . self-consciously eschew the capturing of power in favour of alternative strategies that maintain the integrity and autonomy of all constituent singularities. (pp. 221–2)

In seeking to understand this multiplicity and horizontality of NSMs that contrast so starkly with a traditional politics based on class, we are also faced with the need to take account of representative politics – how can one individual give equal representation to a multiplicity of different views? And hence we are also faced with an interrogation of the notion of democracy itself. According to post-Marxist discourse theory, in contrast to Deleuzian/autonomist Marxist politics, horizontality and multiplicity are not necessarily emblematic of an opposition to representative democracy. Laclau and Mouffe challenge, but do not seek a complete break from, the liberal democratic, representative form. Hence their continued attachment to the concept of hegemony. Although Laclau and Mouffe (1985) rid Gramsci's formulation of hegemony of

its rootedness in class structures, they embrace the notion of identities as subject to change through the hegemonic process itself that creates a collective will. Their stress on contingency, the multiplicity of identities, the complex psychological nature of human desire, and the depth of human antagonism ensure that openness to new forms of struggle can be maintained within their formulation of a radical and plural democratic framework. However, against Deleuzians/autonomist Marxists, through the concept of hegemony they emphasize the necessity for vertical relations of identity and representation, as well as horizontal forms of political participation. As Townshend (2004) says,

> The conditions of possibility for hegemonic struggle are characterised by the conflict between two competing logics, of "equivalence" (discourses that stress a sameness of identities as a result of a perceived common negative, threat or enemy) and "difference" (discourses where identities are constructed through non-adversarial, "positive" differences. (p. 5)

In underscoring the presence of disagreement and conflict while retaining an emphasis on equivalence, Laclau and Mouffe encourage us to promote a democratic ethos which looks constantly to the margins of the public realm to recognize the impossibility of spatial closure, or immunization, of the democratic community from difference, and also emphasize the need for a (radically contingent) type of representation, for a hegemonic constitution of unity.

Building on the post-structuralist philosophy of, most particularly, Derrida and Lacan, Laclau and Mouffe seek to reject the authoritarianism, centralism and homogeneity of more traditional forms of left politics based on class, and put forward a response to the psychological issues that relate to identity politics which Marxism largely ignores. But they also seek to differentiate themselves from the more distinctly postmodern perspectives of difference and dispersion through their emphasis on hegemony that they developed from Gramsci. A new radical form of hegemony is considered necessary to unite all the disparate struggles of new social movements and workers. Laclau and Mouffe recognized that politics is not solely a concern of struggle between social classes. Rather, it is concerned with a struggle between complexes of meaningful social practice, or discourses. But discourse here is not simply ideas or words but social *practice* based partly upon material conditions and partly on identity and intersubjectivity. As such, it is a politics that resists essentialist politics and embraces difference, since there are no

natural, inherent connections between various forms of identity (race, sex, gender, class, and so on) and different sets of political demands. Instead they emphasize that hegemonic struggle is the search for the *articulation* of terms and demands. Here, articulation means the joining together of common terms of reference to create a united front. In insisting on the need for a unified front, a universalism of sorts, they accept that groups with separate sets of different demands will undertake a process of partial transformation as all those who partake in the coalition adjust to each other's concerns in order to occupy and lay claim to common ground. This form of hegemony creates "a nodal point" of "radical and plural democracy" based upon "the struggle for a maximisation of spheres on the basis of the generalization of the equivalential-egalitarian logic" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 167). The creation and maintenance of this common ground is also seen as partly dependent on "empty signifiers" – symbols or terms shared by a political community that mean very little but signify the coalition as a community. Mouffe (2000) argues that what distinguishes a radical democratic community is the ability to publicly acknowledge the emptiness of such signifiers and thereby enter into open contestation about how that community should be defined. In this formulation, the worst-case scenario would be for an ideal vision of the community and its political future to become fixed and naturalized, excluding the possibility of contestation which is considered to be at the heart of democracy itself. Rather, each grouping would be equally valid and reciprocally free to enable a fully transparent, new utopianism to develop. In this manner, multiplicity, equivalence and individual autonomy combine to reveal a space for the hegemonic "logics" of complete identity and difference to be renegotiated (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 188).

What, then, are the implications of such hegemonic politics for democracy and the question of multiplicity? Radical democracy of the sort proposed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) seeks to persistently contest the dominion of the majority that is the logical conclusion for liberal deliberative democrats, through the constant struggle to maximize multiplicity/difference of identity and struggles. On another level, the way in which liberal democracy is to be radicalized is through hegemonic struggle that involves, at some point, a transcendence of the particular struggle of any one grouping into a form of universalism expressed as the collective will, even if this is recognized as strategically and discursively constituted. Thus there is a tension for discourse theory between the practices of multiplicity and the concept of hegemony. The notion of autonomy, to which we now turn, provides a further illustration of this tension.

Autonomy and the mediated politics of new social movements

The type of autonomy expressed by post-Marxist discourse theorists that operates within a hegemonic frame needs to be clearly distinguished from the post-hegemony theorists (for example, Day, 2005; Holloway, 2002). The former stresses articulation and contingency and recognizes that, although the singularity of multiple voices must be recognized and respected, ultimately it is neither feasible nor desirable that each of these singularities occupies a permanently unified space, politics, or language. In other words, while the singular authenticity of multiple individual voices is constitutive of the whole and must be recognized as such, it is necessary, as noted above, to transcend the particularity of the singular to form a collective identity and counter-hegemony:

> In this way, a counter hegemony can be constructed, although it will be marked by an ineliminable tension between the singularity of the various demands and voices included within the counter hegemonic bloc and their representation within an overarching ideology or programme. The representation does violence to singularity, but the singularities also disrupt the functioning of the representation. (Thomassen, 2007, p. 120)

The embrace of difference and celebration of horizontal networks, as opposed to vertical hierarchies implicit in the notion of multiplicity discussed above, also connects with notions of participation and direct engagement that further reflect the differences between post-Marxist theorists of hegemony and post-hegemony autonomist theorists. Direct engagement is premised on the importance of autonomy of the individual and respect for the singular voice that ultimately will facilitate whatever political struggle is in motion. The notion of participation, however, views autonomy far more from a perspective of the delegation of political representation to the construction of collective consensus or group autonomy and, as such, is ultimately at home in a liberal democratic model (even if it is a radicalized one). Each approach to autonomy can be seen to underpin an understanding of politics and political transformation implicit within it and hence the particular theorization of power and social change that each invokes. Applying Laclau and Mouffe's discursive theory of hegemony takes us beyond a neo-Gramscian model, through the rejection of essentialist concepts of actors and an embrace of difference, as discussed above, but not as far as the post-hegemony autonomists

who refuse all leadership and forms of representative, bureaucratic politics in favour of open movements that are "characterised by the development of goals, objectives and meanings immanently or between members on a dialogical, reciprocal or horizontal basis" (Robinson & Tormey, 2007, p. 128).

The relevance of the notion of autonomy for each perspective can be illustrated with reference to the Zapatistas. Several writers have traced the use of the Internet with political struggle to the experience of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and their political rebellion against neoliberal capitalism and, in particular, against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in pursuit of the liberation of Chiapas. Although many have written about the Zapatistas (see below), their link to both autonomy and radical democracy is worth expanding upon here, as it marks an approach that has characterized much of the politics of NSMs that have followed on from it. From the outset, the Zapatista struggle, led by the Subcomandante Marcos, differentiated itself from previous political movements through a disregard for state power and hierarchical structures and a clear focus on autonomy and direct democracy (Klein, 2002; Graeber, 2002). Concurrently, they also placed importance on interconnectedness and networking, using the Internet to create a collective political identity that spread across the globe (Atton, 2007; Castells, 1997; Kowal, 2002; Ribeiro, 1998; Slater, 1998). Subcomandante Marcos deliberately resisted the status of leader and refused any name that would identify him as an individual. The conflict in Chiapas gave rise to the People's Global Action network (PGA), which lead to the 1999 Seattle demonstrations and the creation of the movement for global justice (Day, 2005; Graeber, 2002; Holloway, 2002) with the Internet cemented as part of the repertoire of political action (Traugott, 1995). The Internet was also seen as evidence that radical politics can arise horizontally and take the form of networks, rather than hierarchical hegemonies.

The conceptualization and enactment of autonomy in the networked sociality of new social movements has been forged through a connection to anarchism and autonomous Marxism. These approaches imagine the network as an ever-open space of politics. From this perspective, the network is not simply the expression of networked individuals, but the manifestation of self-constituted, un-hierarchical, and affinity-based relationships, which create themselves beyond state borders and have the combined notions of "autonomy" and "solidarity" (to overcome power/neoliberalism) at their core (Graeber, 2002, p. 68). This leads Day (2005) to claim that the rise of the movements for global justice based on anarchist political strategies and autonomous discourses that refuse

a singular social totality implies that the "logic of hegemony" has been exhausted, "Gramsci is dead" (p. 203). Such a claim, however, does seem to gloss over the post-Marxist shift in Gramscian theory. If we take heed of Laclau and Mouffe's formulation of hegemony as entirely relational and contingent on context, then we must accept that it is not defined as a fixed structure or as a particular social relation. Yet Day harks back to classical Marxist conceptualizations of hegemony that view society as a totality with a central locus of power, thereby assuming that deference to a single ideology can be the only outcome of political projects that seek to subsume minority concerns into liberal society.

The eulogizing, from the likes of Day (2005), of the emancipatory qualities of new social movements as indicative of the end of hegemony, based on their autonomy from state power, is deeply problematic. When a politics of new social movements resides on autonomy as freedom for oneself disconnected from everything, including its own history, then autonomy becomes a limitation rather than a freedom. Through its insistence on relationality and contingency, post-Marxist discourse theory encourages us to acknowledge the complexity of power relations at any one time. To do otherwise is not only to deny that relations of influence occur between different components or factors in a political process; it is also to deny the complexity of social and political relations that develop between contemporary political movements and dominant political institutions (Barassi, 2010). Indeed, as Barassi (2010) points out, transnational social movement organizations are very much interlinked with dominant political institutions such as local and national governments (McCarthy, 1997; Kriesberg, 1997) and cannot be understood in isolation from them. Barassi (2010) also points to the work of Starn et al. (2005) amongst the *ronda campesinas* in northern Peru, in which he shows how the movements were developing a politics based on the idea of autonomy while simultaneously being aided by the influence of the Church (Gledhill, 1994). As Barassi argues, emphasizing autonomy as the defining characteristic of NSMs risks essentializing not only the movements themselves but also understandings of the reach of the state. Approaches that foreground individual autonomy, and suggest that the liberation or enabling of this autonomy opens up a space for a new politics of the global, frequently fail to take account of state autonomy and hence of broader relations of power. When they do, they often come with an anarchist reading that the international realm is one of freedom and possibility precisely because the autonomy of the individual is not constrained by the autonomy of the state. Indeed, it is argued that "anarchism is not the political ideology of disorder, but of autonomy, and a

framework for understanding how groups and individuals can relate without the need for states" (Prichard, 2010, p. 24). This bifurcates the world between individuals and structures and robs us of an understanding of collective agency, whether in the form of trade unions, social class, NGOs, or multinationals. Alternatively, a purely structuralist vision wherein autonomy seems to be impossible and structures reign supreme is equally problematic: where is group or, indeed, individual agency if structures leave no room for it?

Such approaches all too frequently overlook the critical contextual factors of state boundaries, prevalent political infrastructures, and ever-dominant economic constraints that raise critical questions regarding the political efficacy of these movements. Frequently, such approaches either disregard the impact of the politics of NSMs on a state polity or base the success of such movements on their ability to function external to a state polity and, as a consequence, they are not well placed to assess the nature and consequence of the political act in a broader context of political structures, leaving wide open the critical question: how open to contest and revision is politics today?

Equally problematic, however, is the frequent oversight on behalf of much post-Marxist discourse theory to analyse in depth the *conditions* required for political transformation and democracy (however conceived) to become established. Post-Marxist discourse theory often underestimates the extent to which democratic procedures and outcomes (of both mainstream and alternative politics) are shaped by the "actions of those with access to the media, to mechanisms of representation and to political parties" (Tormey & Townshend, 2006, p. 224).

The Internet, new social movements, and autonomy

Approaching social and political transformation from the perspective of the media is also, however, prone to problems. The role of the Internet in extending political engagement has been elaborated upon by many theorists who have considered the consequences of network sociality for political citizenship more generally. These could benefit from a reminder of Laclau and Mouffe's insistence on the complexity of social relations that makes political struggle necessarily hegemonic in character. In Benkler's (2006) analysis, the Internet has the potential to change the practice of democracy radically because of its participatory and interactive attributes. He argues that it allows all citizens (not just those operating loosely within the parameters of NSMs) to alter their relationship to the public sphere, become creators and primary subjects engaged

in social production – to be autonomous. In this sense the Internet is ascribed the powers of democratization. This may be the result of the networked individual, but it is primarily the liberation of the individual over that of the group that is emphasized.

Castells (2009) refers to the concept of "creative autonomy" (p. 136). According to Castells, with the developments of "Web 2.0" we are witnessing an historical transformation of communication practices which will have considerable consequences for social organization and cultural change. He argues that a new form of communication has emerged: the "mass communication of the self," made possible particularly through social media platforms where self-generated messages created by individuals can reach global audiences (pp. 58–71). In analysing this new form of communication, Castells (2009) refers to Eco's idea of the "creative audience" (p. 127), and contends that with the development of Web 2.0 platforms the potential for the audience to take charge of its communicative practices has increased, giving rise to unprecedented levels of autonomy imbued with emancipatory possibilities to which NSMs bear witness.

However, both Castells and Benkler operate with an underdeveloped concept of hegemony and hence of political transformation. Castells does contend that, with the expansion of the Web 2.0 project, the creative autonomy of subjects is under permanent threat from multimedia businesses, who constantly seek to re-commodify autonomous communication. But, despite maintaining a more dialectical approach, Castells (2009) believes that self-expression through new media platforms can act as a tool of resistance, maintaining that ". . . the construction of communicative autonomy is directly related to the development of social and political autonomy, a key factor in fostering social change" (p. 414).

On one level, Castells and Benkler would appear to be right in relation to NSMs and their online practices: through the mass communication of the self, new media enable the participation of citizens in politically significant ways – the green revolution in Iran being a recent example (Khiabany, 2010). But it is important to further critique the nature of autonomy and participation that is heralded as promoting social change as outlined above. Castells (2009) focuses on an approach that prioritizes the importance of self-expression that originates from an individual formulation and act – creative autonomy. Political participation is construed via the role of the individual. It is the individual subject that is asked to develop new techniques of the self as acts of resistance, encouraged to mobilize in favor of political issues, or persuaded to get involved in the debates that precede political elections (Castells, 2009,

pp. 299–364). Individual political subjectivity is central to political engagement, but we should also remember that political participation is frequently defined by, and takes place in relation to, coordination with others. It is not enough simply to say that this is a new networked form of politics. As Laclau and Mouffe might say, every social, cultural, or political identity is always fragmented and characterized by its multifaceted relations to others. Any temporary stabilizations that could be called hegemonic can only be achieved through a process of *articulation* with others. Laclau and Mouffe emphasize the importance of articulation as a process of seeking common terms of reference as a prelude to the formation of political coalitions, resulting in the partial transformation of all involved groups. Foregrounding creative autonomy of the self in relation to new technological forms negates the collective dimension of political participation so prevalent in new social movements, and thereby dissipates the political properties of the participatory communicative act itself.

Castells' main concern in his latest book (2009) is to uncover issues of power and counter-power in the digital age. He argues that it is of fundamental importance to highlight the networks of power that are constructed by global multimedia business, and understand how these relate to national and international politics. He sees the contemporary historical situation as being shaped by a conflict of networks. On one side, we have the networks of power, the ones constructed around multimedia businesses. On the other, we have the networks of counter-power, the ones shaped by the mass communication of the self. But the practice of the self, through the form of creative autonomy he advocates, seems to bear little relation to the deeper and broader social and political contexts in which it takes place. And this brings us directly back once more to concepts of hegemony. A consideration of social and political contexts brings to bear a critical consideration of the dominant framings of acceptable political action and social organization, as well as the broader positioning of political activity within neoliberal discourse. In this contemporary political configuration, participation is framed in terms of individualistic values that are clearly identifiable in much of the life and action in new media and in social media in particular. Hence, the creative autonomy of individuals enabled by new communication technologies that Castells (2009) proclaims as liberatory can equally be interpreted, drawing on Castoriadis (1991), as "individualistic autonomy" conducive to neoliberal practice.

Indeed, Castoriadis' discussion of different levels of autonomy is particularly helpful as a corrective here. He makes a crucial distinction

between individualistic autonomy, social autonomy (through equality of participation), and autonomy as political subjectivity (that liberates the imagination). In this critique of autonomy, Castoriadis confronts autonomy within the system of neoliberal capitalism (individualistic) with autonomy that seeks to challenge the system (social) or transcend the system (through political subjectivity), arguing for better recognition of the social-historical conditions for, and the social-historical dimensions of, the project of autonomy. Of course, while these theoretical distinctions are useful in enabling us to interrogate the term, in daily life, facilitated by converged media, we may well engage in all three forms of autonomy at once. We may go on to a social networking site and comment on the latest celebrity gossip story, then click and link our way to a petition on ending child poverty, while updating our blog that tells everyone what we've just done and how we think the world could be a better place.

This chimes with Habermas' (1996) understanding of "the co-originality of private autonomy and public autonomy" (p. 104) – though they may be opposed, they are internally related and "reciprocally presuppose each other" (Habermas, 1996, p. 417). In other words, it acknowledges the deep context in which any form of autonomy or creativity is situated and seeks to understand its various manifestations in relation to it. The problem with the notion of creative autonomy and the emphasis in new social movements on autonomous individuals is the prioritization of the individual over the political and collective context that resists problematizing the notion of autonomy in relation to broader social and political contexts.

Therefore claims that the starting conditions for social and political action have been radically changed by Web 2.0, while suggestive in some respects, leave crucial issues unexplored. Commenting on techno-optimistic approaches to social networking sites, Fuchs (2009) contends that

> The empowerment discourse issue is individualistic because it focuses research primarily on how individuals use international social networking sites for making connections, maintaining or receiving friendships, falling in love, creating autonomous spaces etc. It does not focus on how technology and technology use are framed by political issues and issues that concern the development of society, such as capitalist crises, profit interest, global war, the globalization of capitalism, or the rise of a surveillance society. (Fuchs, 2009, p. 18)

Indeed, Castells' (2009) own empirical results seem to suggest that digital citizens are far from being autonomous from capital. On the vast majority of platforms that they visit, their personal data and online behavior is stored and assessed in order to generate profit by targeted advertising. The users who Google data, upload or watch videos on YouTube, upload or browse personal images on Flickr, or accumulate friends with whom they exchange content or communicate online via social networking platforms, constitute an audience commodity that is sold to advertisers. The difference between the audience commodity on traditional mass media and on the Internet is that in the latter case the users are also content producers. The contemporary turn of phrase: "user-generated content" is a catch-all description of the endless creative activity, communication, community building, and content production online. But this still does not denude the fact that this user activity is commodified. In fact, it can be argued that we are excessively and ever more deeply commodified as so much more of our daily habits and rituals take a digitized form. During much of the time that users spend online, they generate profits for large corporations like Google, News Corporation (which owns MySpace), or Yahoo! (which owns Flickr). Advertisements on the Internet are frequently personalized - this is made possible by the surveillance of, storage of, and assessment of user activities and user data with the help of computers and databases (Andrejevic, 2004). The audience turned producer does not, in this context, signify a democratization of the media toward a truly participatory system. It certainly does not confer autonomy from capital, but rather the profound and sub-cybernetic commodification of online human creativity.

If we take Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) proposition that politics is a struggle between complexes of meaningful social practice, in other words, between discourses and a struggle between discourses is always a struggle between sets of practices, as well as ideas, then we must also insist on political economic concerns as one set of practices. We are then reminded that the Internet does not transcend global capitalism, but is deeply involved with it by virtue of the corporate interests it supports and the discourses of capitalism and neoliberalism that are constantly reproduced by its users. One of these discourses is the "network." The network promises flexibility in the practices of living and working, speed and efficiency in domestic and professional worlds, as well as the rewards of a limitless archive and abundance of information that comes from being connected. Networked capitalism insists on always being switched on and online in order to live the network, but rarely acknowledges that, as Couldry (2010, p. 33) states, "networks are only possible because of

underlying practices of meaning." In a neoliberal context, the overriding practice of meaning is the market that has made a virtue out of the necessity of mobility and connection that the network brings. But the network also "presents itself as the negation of categories to which people are attached on a permanent basis, and thanks to which they can construct collective norms setting limits on their individual passions" (Boltanski & Chiappello, 2005, p. 432). In this manner, not only must the Internet be seen as deeply commodified while being conducive to sociality and to the facilitation of political networking, but networking itself must be understood as a resource for capitalism that enables the exploitation of labor through constant access to the worker and the erosion of some of the social conditions such as stable contexts for affiliation, cooperation, and organization (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005) necessary for alternative discourses to emerge.

Seen from this angle, the multiplicity and autonomy that have been proclaimed as revolutionary, take on a different complexion, as we are forced to recognize and take account of current relations of power in an online context that encircle (but do not enslave) the agency of individuals. We are also encouraged to recognize and take account of communicational life without fetishizing the media forms that may enable it. In resisting a fetishized media centrism, we are also encouraged to rethink the complex of relations involved in any political movement in a critical contextual frame in order to understand mediation and its relationship to our social and cultural practices.

And this brings us back full circle to the notion of autonomy that is somehow thrust upon us in an online world along with the celebration of participation that is its ally. Žižek (1997) has called this "inter-passivity" by which he means that our online involvement gives the illusion of activity, a circulation of endless opinion resulting in the fetishization of contribution that is ultimately passive. This resonates with Dean's (2010) analysis of communicative capitalism – a technoscientific form of democracy that talks without responding. A communicative politics that resides in an obsession with voice – where everyone has one but few get heard and even fewer are responded to in a manner that could ever be heralded as politically significant. The flip side, of course, is, when you want to be ignored, new media also makes that impossible too as all your digital comings and goings can be tracked; and even the smallest whisper can be policed, monitored, traced, and criminalized (Khiabany, 2010).

We also have to ask ourselves – does the autonomy endowed upon us in this communicative nirvana and the multiplicity of voices it facilitates e*xtend the range of contestation?* And then, who and what is favored as

the subjects and matter of politics, and who and what are dis-favoured, or made less likely? Inputs to politics that generate intense feedback loops from multiple commentators in real time such that a response goes "viral" are more likely to gain mainstream media coverage. Recently, this has been particularly relevant in relation to the micro-blogging social networking platform Twitter. It is rarely acknowledged, however, that 90 per cent of Twitter traffic is generated by 10 per cent of respondents who have managed to amass a multitude of followers, often as a consequence of their celebrity status (Heil & Piskorski, 2009). Furthermore, the types of popular subjects and matter that dominant media institutions are predisposed to recognize can lead to an argument that expansions in networked communications media reinforce the hegemony of liberal democratic rhetoric:

> through fetishizing speech, opinion and participation. It suggests to us that the number of friends you have on Facebook, the number of page-hits on your blog, your self-made celebrification are markers of success and details such as duration, depth of commitment, corporate and financial influence, access to structures of decision making and the narrowing of political struggle to the standards of do-it-yourself entertainment culture are the preoccupation of old fashioned, outmoded political activists. (Dean, 2010, p. 17)

The mythic dimension of the openness of new media has brought about a hegemonic discourse based on the rhetoric of multiplicity and pluralism, autonomy, access, and participation. While it is widely presupposed that this corresponds automatically to a more pluralistic society and enhanced democracy, Dean (2010) reminds us that this hegemonic formation also happens to coincide with extreme corporatisation, financialisation and privatization across the globe.

In the UK, a recent report by the Carnegie UK Trust (2010) remarks on diminishing arenas for public deliberation, along with the marginalization of dissent especially in relation to those that lack power or confidence to voice their concerns or those who have non-mainstream views. This narrowing of the public sphere appears to be happening despite the expansion of mediated space and multiplicity of media platforms and claims regarding interactivity, speed and the international reach of online communications. As Norval (2007) reminds us (drawing on Laclau and Mouffe), we must avoid "assum[ing] the existence of a framework of politics in which in principle every voice could be heard, without giving attention to the very structuring of those frameworks

and the ways in which the visibility of subjects is structured" (p. 102). So rather than simply celebrating new media as multiplying contestation, amplifying dissent and thereby enhancing autonomy we should also consider the critical question raised by Dean (2010): "why at a time when the means of communication has been revolutionalised, why has democracy failed as a political form? Why has neoliberalism become ever more entrenched?" (p. 25).

And this is where the post-Marxist discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe comes unstuck. If, as Laclau and Mouffe maintain, the power of political mobilizations resides in the joint articulation of demands (Laclau, 2005) through a community of coalition that is premised on antagonism (that may itself be problematic at the point of initiation, although desirable in its actualization), it is not entirely clear what is actually involved in bringing together this coalition of groups and individuals in practice. How can such a transformative politics be realized? This is precisely the question with which NSMs are themselves struggling (Notes from Nowhere, 2003). As Tormey and Townshend (2006) state, the significance of post-Marxist discourse theory for understanding new social movements and their mediation is to emphasize the importance of plurality, diversity, and difference in understanding individual and social existence and hence in beginning to fathom how social democratic change might occur. But it is worth returning to Marx to re-emphasize that plurality, diversity, and difference are often difficult to express under conditions of material poverty, exploitation, and oppression. Individual particularities and political desires alone, albeit articulated together and facilitated by new communication technologies, will not reclaim and rebuild the institutions necessary to reveal and sustain a new political order.

Conclusion

I have argued above, drawing on the debates raised by post-Marxist discourse theory, that it is not enough simply to celebrate agency and resistance through the conduit of the Internet and the veneration of multiplicity and difference. Neither is it enough to single out individual autonomy without appreciating the social construction of political identity. Rather, we must do both at once and find a means to interrogate discourse and power, contradiction and control, and the various manifestations of "the political," so as to to avoid the centrifugal tendencies of approaches that deal with oversimplified theorizations of social relations within advanced capitalist societies.

The online world does seem to encourage an increasing fluidity between the categories of the social, cultural, and political. But the danger in a constantly fluid and slippery world where affiliations with discourses of state, religion, morality, and so forth are no longer static, and where relationships with social practices are constantly re-examined and re-formed, is that the political becomes more elusive as there are no longer sites that are anchored to sedimented politics (Bauman, 2000). How do you translate this discursive political life into actual political change? This leads Bauman to express concern over the narcissism involved in the politics of self-interest. The liquid citizen possessing autonomy and flexibility is deeply and constantly dissatisfied because their autonomy is only given on the basis that it is groundless. It is not related to anything specific but elusively floats around an ever-changing amalgamation of everything without anywhere to anchor. So there are many thousands of political videos on YouTube each presenting their own particular protest, but for what ends? The digitally enabled citizen may have found new forms of political expression which may, as yet, develop into new forms of political consciousness; but how and where does this consciousness settle and take root?

Genuine democratization requires the real and material participation of the oppressed and excluded; the real and material recognition of difference along with the space for contestation and an understanding and response to its meaning. This is not an argument simply for inclusivity, multiplicity, participation, or for the creative autonomy of every individual; it is so much more than that. These claims alone can only ever take us to first base. They may well be suggestive of possible changes in the dynamics of action. But acknowledging this should not give way to a fetishization of multiplicity or autonomy through notions of participation or interactivity.

Post-Marxist discourse theory reminds us that all creative human activity holds the potential for political transformative capacity. But to understand how this potential can be translated into a reality requires an appreciation of the enduring social and political relations that surround and pre-exist certain individuals and their relations with others. Broadening radical political imagination to think outside of existing neoliberal frameworks can never be a solitary project; it must be a collective endeavor. This is not to deny the role of individuals in the single acts of political intervention. Rather, it is a plea to recognize and appreciate the extent of struggle required to counter the practices of domination that are ever more deeply embedded in the means of communication.

Multiplicity and autonomy alone offer no way of fathoming the means to transcend and replace dominant hegemonic discourses. Only when we can reach a full appreciation of our online mediations and their contingent and multiple relations to structure and agency (whether we see these as discursively constituted or not) can we assess the *feasibility* of achieving a new hegemony, of transforming the existing political order, either partially or radically, and the role of mediation therein. Despite the claims of multiplicity and autonomy, we need to be reminded constantly that politics and its transformation rest on material conditions and their consequences both for individuals and for organizations and institutions.

Networks are not inherently liberatory; network openness does not lead us directly to democracy. The identification and communication of injustice and inequality is only one part of political action. The practices of new media *may* be liberating for the user, but not necessarily democratizing for society. Politics is, of course, about more than communication and more than participation in communication and more than creative autonomy; it is about more than protest, it is about uniting wills in the quest to provide a solidity for power. Liberatory power requires the unifying force of the collective – it is about more than inclusion, more than participation even, it is about transformation – and transformation is about institutional creation.

New social movements may be magnifying the shift to a more fluid, issue-based politics with less institutional coherence, where political engagement via the Internet offers atomized expressions of social activism that move in and out of focus, reflecting a move to newer forms of civic engagement that speak to the felt experience of being political, rather than the delivery of a political project. But we would be wise to remember that the wider social contexts in which networks are formed and exist have a political architecture that predates the Internet.

Note

1. Although referring to new social movements throughout, this chapter draws mainly on the various contemporary configurations of global justice movements that have emerged over the last decade. These mark a distinct shift from the new social movements that developed since the 1960s, around issues such as gender and sexual politics, race and ethnicity, peace and the environment, which had a strong middle-class basis and contrasted with collective working-class politics of labour that preceded them. Contemporary new social movements include the latter, but have also seen a return of protest on material

issues of social justice. See della Porta and Diani (2006) for a more detailed discussion and analysis.

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9

Mediated Construction of the People: Laclau's Political Theory and Media Politics[1]

Jon Simons

In his book *On Populist Reason*, Ernesto Laclau (2005) encapsulates his political theory up to that point, arguing that "populism is the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such" (p. 67). By this he means that, through an understanding of the oft-denigrated phenomenon of populism, we can grasp some of the fundamental, discursive operations of all politics. The most crucial political operation is the discursive construction of the primary subject of modern politics, the people: "the political operation *par excellence* is always going to be the construction of a 'people' " (p. 153). Thus, in Laclau's view, all politics is populist, though some is more so than others (p. 154), because all politics partakes of the "social logic" of populism (p. xi). More precisely, Laclau means that populism is the political logic of democracy, which he regards as "the only truly political society" (Laclau, 2001, p. 10). Certainly, on the face of it, the *demos* or people must be central to any conception of democratic politics. And if, as Laclau holds, there is no political subjectivity prior to its discursive construction, then surely we must attend to the operation of that construction as the condition of possibility for democracy.

My purpose in this chapter is to argue that Laclau's political theory of the constitution of the political subjectivity of the people is sorely in need of media and cultural theory in its accounts of the discursive construction of the people. Laclau's concrete accounts of various populist movements proceed without detailed reference to his theoretical formulations, indicating that the latter are unequal to the task of explaining how one hegemonic formation succeeds and another fails. I suggest that the almost total absence of the dimension of media and cultural theory in his approach to the construction of the people is symptomatic of a formalist and psychoanalytic (more precisely Lacanian) tendency in his

work. Laclau extends Lacan's dictum that "the unconscious is structured like a language" (Lacan, 1977, p. 203) by proceeding as if politics is also structured as a language. Despite his protestations to the contrary that discourse is not only "textual," his theoretical notion of "discursive construction" is too limited to a linguistic sense of discourse. Laclau's linguistic formalism overwhelms and precludes theorization of a contextual, historical appreciation of political contingency. To explain why some hegemonic constructions of the people succeed while others fail, and do so at some points rather than others, Laclau's theory of populism should attend to the practical aspects of discursive construction that explain the relative force of competing hegemonic projects. Key among the practices, processes and institutions that are missing from Laclau's theory of the construction of the people, as well as his historical examples, are those of the mass media and popular culture.

Yet the scope of my critique of Laclau's theory of populism in this chapter is limited, because I am less concerned with his conception of populism per se than with developing its enormous insight through a conjuncture with media theory. It may be the case, as Yannis Stavrakakis (2004, p. 263) and Benjamin Arditi (2007, p. 48) have claimed, that Laclau's conflation of (democratic) politics and populism limits the usefulness of the concept as a tool for concrete political analysis. However, I leave such reservations aside for now. In what follows, I will first summarize Laclau's theory of the construction of the people, then critique his application of the theory to specific manifestations of populism. My purpose in doing so is to emphasize that political discourse theory cannot be applied unproblematically to media politics and to demonstrate the need for a framework (the outlines of which I can but sketch within the confines of this chapter) in which discourse theory works in conjunction with media and cultural theory to explain the constitution of the people as political subjectivities.

Populism and mass psychology

According to Laclau, populism is a social logic, not a concept that refers to particular social groups in populist movements, nor to a distinct political ideology. He regards attempts to define populism along those referential lines as impasses that, unable to grasp the general concept of populism, denigrate populism because of its vagueness and imprecision. In contrast, Laclau argues that the prejudice against populism is "inscribed in . . . the *grande peur* of the nineteenth-century social sciences: the whole discussion concerning 'mass psychology'" (2005, p. 19). His review of figures

from Gustave Le Bon through to Sigmund Freud traces a progressive renegotiation of a stark contrast between the irrational crowd and the rational individual, or, in his terms, "the duality between social homogeneity (or indistinctness) and social differentiation" (p. 61). The discourse of mass psychology tended to pathologize crowds while considering normal society to be marked by social distinctions and hierarchies. In Laclau's terms, early mass psychology denied that an ordered society could be structured according to the social logic of equivalence, or the articulation of differential social elements into hegemony.

The discourse of mass psychology became more productive by the end of the nineteenth century when Gabriel Tarde shifted from a conception of "imitation" in crowd behavior, along the pattern of suggestion or hypnosis by an active leader manipulating a passive crowd, to a notion of mutual suggestion between leaders and the led, which is characteristic of all modern societies, not only pathological ones. The breakthrough in mass psychology does not occur in Laclau's assessment, though, until Freud questions the notion of "suggestion" altogether, claiming instead that the social bonds in organizations such as the church or army are emotional, libidinal at source, being diverted love drives, a mixture of identification between brothers and love for the father. Laclau (2005) reads into Freud's group psychology a model of society oscillating on a continuum between the poles of coercion and consensus, depending on how separate from or close to the social group the leader is, and one that is close enough to his own theory of hegemony to be "retooled" (p. 63) for socio-political analysis. According to Laclau's overview of the history of the discourse of mass psychology, the dismissal of populism is grounded in "the denigration of the masses" and the "repudiation of the undifferentiated milieu which is the 'crowd' or the 'people' in the name of social structuration" (p. 63). Laclau recognizes that populism ranges from reactionary to radical democratic manifestations, but insists that a populist logic of equivalence and homogenization is immanent in all mass and democratic politics. Hence, populism cannot be disparaged as irrational without disparaging democracy.

The discursive constitution of the people

Reduced to the barest features of Laclau's (2005) theory, there are three interrelated conditions and variables of populism, or the constitution of the people as a political subject: "[1] equivalential relations hegemonically represented through empty signifiers; [2] displacements of the internal frontiers through the production of floating signifiers; and

[3] a constitutive heterogeneity" (p. 156). Each of these formulations is quite dense, requiring some elaboration. First, the equivalential logic applies to heterogeneous or differentiated social elements that, along the lines of post-structuralist theories of signification, have no positive or objective meaning or existence other than as relations of the different elements. Laclau treats discourse as "any complex of elements in which *relations* play the constitutive role" (p. 68), a definition that is broad enough in principle to cover a more than textual notion of discourse. The elements in question for populism are social demands (not social groups, movements, or practices), which can begin as requests to existing political institutions and power arrangements, but can become demands if a request is not met: "the frustration of an *individual* demand transforms the request into a claim as far as people see themselves as bearers of rights that are not recognized" (Laclau, 2006, p. 655). So long as the demand, say for solutions to a housing problem, is more or less restricted to that issue, it remains a particular demand in the logic of difference, which is a logic of inclusion, adding or combining demands to be addressed without changing the overall power structure. The powers that be are apt to try to fulfil or placate particular demands differentially, treating them as separate issues that require differing solutions or responses. Both welfare state and neoliberal market polities tend to follow this logic and present themselves as systems that can address social demands differentially, though neither can do so totally. (For an obvious example, think of the mantra that the market can provide solutions for social needs from entertainment to health care.)

Social demands become equivalential when they are articulated with other demands: "People whose demands concerning housing are frustrated see that other demands concerning transport, health, security, schooling are not met either" (Laclau, 2006, p. 655). They understand their different demands to be equivalent to each other in some manner; not because demands already share an identity but rather because the particular demands articulated through an equivalential chain all change, where articulation is "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 105).

The logics of equivalence and difference are, however, never entirely distinct from each other, always existing in tension with each other:

> All identity is constructed within this tension between the differential and the equivalential logics . . . this means that in the locus of the totality we find only this tension. What we have, ultimately, is a failed totality, the place of an irretrievable fullness. (Laclau, 2005, p. 70)

The first part of this formulation refers in political terms to what Laclau takes to be the fact that no political system can be either fully equivalential or differential. Even in its Jacobin period, when the French Revolution operated as an equivalential chain in which all social demands were articulated in the name of the "people," the workers' demands were not fully congruent with the direction taken by the leaders of the revolution, who nonetheless also took those demands into account. Similarly, neoliberal regimes that pursue a differential logic of fulfilling all demands through the market posit an enemy that obstructs its success, such as trade unions or protectionism. Equivalence plays a constitutive role as something like the articulation between "free markets" and individual freedom. And so "equivalence and difference are ultimately incompatible with each other; none the less they require each other as necessary conditions for the construction of the social" (p. 80).

Populism, or the operation in which the people is constituted as a political subject, privileges the equivalential moment, even though Laclau's point about failed or incomplete social and discursive totalities applies clearly to the failure of the equivalential logic to articulate all social demands in the name of the people. Such failure is necessary because "there is no totalization without exclusion" (p. 78), each discursive formation, or society, requiring some excluded element according to which it can exist as a system of differences. In other words, the regularity of meanings in language or social arrangements that are constituted through relations of difference itself requires another unrelatable "thing" which is outside of and sets the limits to society or discourse as a configuration of differences. "It is on the basis of its own limits that a formation is shaped as a totality" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 143). As there is no referential basis for meaning in language, and as no social action or identity precedes others, there has to be a "negativity" (p. 144) that sets the limits to the otherwise infinite possibilities of articulation in a discursive formation as a "regularity in dispersion" (p. 105). Because there is no ground for what makes a language meaningful and social differences a society, a negativity allows society to be what it is only because it is *not* this negativity. As a discursive formation can never exist without this excluded negativity, "no discursive formation is a sutured totality" (p. 106).

Drawing on Derrida's logic of deconstruction, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* Laclau and Mouffe conceive of such negativity as a "surplus of meaning" which both subverts language or society as a totality and yet "is the necessary terrain for the constitution of every social practice" (p. 111). No society can be a fully achieved totality in that "society never manages to be identical with itself" (p. 113) because of this excluded

negativity or surplus. Laclau himself writes that "such an exclusion presupposes the split of all identity between its differential nature . . . and its equivalential bonds" (Laclau, 2005, p. 78). Another way to put this is that the excluded negativity is akin to the incompatibility between the two logics, which yet need each other in order to function.

Thus far I have established that the discursive constitution of linguistic meaning, society, and the people as a political subject is relational, entailing not only equivalential relations but also the constitutive role of the excluded negativity as well as the tension between logics of equivalence and difference. I now return to the question of how "an equivalential articulation of demands" (Laclau, 2005, p. 74) occurs, which is another way of asking how demands become hegemonic, and how they are represented as such. The key to this is that one of the social demands, while remaining a particular demand, is able to stand in for other social demands, speaking for the people universally: "one difference, without ceasing to be a *particular* difference, assumes the representation of an incommensurable totality" (p. 70). This equivalential relation is also a "rhetorical displacement" in that "a literal term is substituted by a figural one" (p. 71). Hegemony and "the political construction of 'the people' is . . . essentially catachrestical" (p. 72) in that it requires a figural term, the empty signifier, which cannot be constituted by a literal term. In his earlier work on populism, before elaborating the notion of the empty signifier, Laclau (1977, p. 143) held that "reference to 'the people' occupies a central place in populism." But in his more recent writing, Laclau (2005) argues that other empty signifiers in addition to "the people" function in populism, thereby moving his theory in a formalist direction (Stavrakakis, 2004, p. 262).

An empty signifier is empty in the sense that it can serve as a vessel for other social demands or represent them symbolically, as *Solidarność* did when it signified wide popular opposition to the Soviet-backed regime in Poland, yet also stood for the workers' particular demands. Empty signifiers are demands, such as in the slogan "peace, bread, land" in Russia in 1917, or for the realization of principles such as "liberty" or "the Rights of Man," which can articulate into "national anti-status quo discourses" demands that would, as in pre-revolutionary France, otherwise dissipate as pre-industrial food riots (Laclau, 2005, p. 75). A leader can often be the empty signifier through which hegemony is articulated, giving his or her name to a popular identity, as in Argentina's Peronist movement. The empty signifier, whether a demand, an idea, a discourse or a name, is a "positive symbolic expression" around which different demands or actions crystallize in becoming popular (Laclau, 2005, p. 82).

However, because an empty signifier does not cease to represent a particular demand at the same time as it represents the universal demand of "the people," it is never entirely empty. In the philosophical language Laclau (2005) borrows from Heidegger, the remaining particular content of the empty signifier is "ontic," whereas its discursive function in condensing signification of "the people" is "ontological" (p. 87). Laclau has also deployed the term "tendentially empty signifiers" to convey this sense that the universality of a demand for a universal principle such as justice "is only achievable through the mediation of a particularity" or a "specific historic context" (2001, pp. 11–12). Laclau means that although signifiers of popular universality have a tendency to emptiness, there are always "remainders of particularity" (p. 11) which, as Thomassen puts it (2005), make the signifiers relatively rather than utterly empty (p. 295). Chains of equivalence and signification generally are not established anew in each political situation, but operate in terrains that are "the result of prior hegemonic articulation" (p. 295) that sediment meanings. Hence to answer "why some signifiers come to represent the whole and others do not" (p. 295) requires "a careful analysis of the historical context" (p. 299). In the context of the First World War and the Russian Revolution of 1917, the abstract demand for "peace" had a particular meaning.

Yet, when it comes to elaborating further the *ontological* operation of the empty signifier of populism, Laclau turns not to a contextualist, historical approach, but shows "how the logic of hegemony and that of the Lacanian *objet a* largely overlap and refer to a fundamental ontological relation in which fullness can only be touched through a radical investment in a partial object" (Laclau, 2006, p. 651). The empty signifier is, in the Lacanian psychoanalytical terms to which Laclau adheres, a partial object that stands in for and in effect become a totality, the lost *jouissance* of "the mythical wholeness of the mother/child dyad" (p. 114). The breast is a partial object that can satisfy libidinal drives that would otherwise become destructive in their efforts to overcome the split with the primordial mother. Laclau holds that while relations of signification explain the *form* of investments in empty signifiers, only by attending to "the order of affect" can he explain the *force* of those investments (p. 110). Although Laclau (2005) adopts Freudian language to make this significant supplemental move in his theory that should, on the face of it, render it less formalistic, his reading of Freud remains Lacanian, though mediated through Joan Copjec rather than Slavoj Žižek (pp. 111–16). "Lacan's *objet petit a* is the key element in a social ontology" (p. 115) because both individual and political life are driven

by a vain search for "mythical fullness . . . the restoration of the mother/child unity or, in political terms, the fully reconciled society (p. 119). Unfulfilled political demands are transferred to the empty signifier or partial object, becoming "the rallying point of passionate attachments" and the locus of popular identity (p. 115). I will argue below that by treating affect in this manner, as an ontological universal, Laclau cannot explain the force of particular affective investments in populism that occur at specific times. Moreover, affect does not operate politically as a factor in its own right, but gains its force through practices and institutions, including those of the media.

We can now move on from Laclau's first condition for the construction of the people ("equivalential relations hegemonically represented through empty signifiers") to the second: "displacements of the internal frontiers through the production of floating signifiers" (Laclau, 2005, p. 156). This involves the "formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the 'people' from power" (p. 74), through "*rival* hegemonic projects" (p. 131). The notion of antagonistic or discursive frontiers refers back to the excluded element discussed above "that the totality expels from itself in order to constitute itself" (p. 70). Popular political subjectivity is constituted in contrast to an internal enemy (for example, "the American people are fed up of Washington"). The equivalential articulation of demands, their anchoring in an empty signifier and common identity, entails a simplification of the socio-political space into opposing antagonistic camps. "One has to discursively construct the enemy – the oligarchy, the establishment, big money, capitalism, globalization" in order to construct "the people of populism" (Laclau, 2006, p. 655).

There are or have been some political situations, such as Tsarist Russia, in which the antagonistic frontier is relatively stable and clearly delineates two camps. But for the most part we cannot assume "the presence of a stable dichotomic frontier within society" (Laclau, 2005, p. 123). Instead, the frontier between the "people" and its "enemy" is constantly shifting, along with the identities of each. As a corollary, Laclau explains that empty signifiers only appear empty once the instability of antagonistic frontiers are taken into account, and can also be recognized as floating signifiers that are not entirely free-floating but have "partial fixation" (p. 133). The difference between empty and floating signifiers is that they are "structurally different" (p. 133) and yet there is an "essential undecidability" (p. 153) about that difference. The meaning of floating signifiers changes depending on shifting articulations and equivalential chains that form in competing efforts to hegemonize. For

example, the "small man" or "working Joe," who was a symbol of left-leaning American New Deal populism, was subsequently appropriated by right-leaning populism directed against communism and the "state." Antagonism, or the constitutive exclusion of the political enemy, also indicates the impossibility of any popular identity being stable and fully sutured, fully anchored in empty signifiers and nodal points. "In the case of antagonism . . . the presence of the 'other' prevents me from being totally myself" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 125). The colonized are constituted as a popular identity in struggle with the colonizers, so even in cases where there appear to be two antagonistic camps, or total equivalence, "the *ultimate* precariousness of all difference" (p. 128) is evident. Society is not divided intrinsically into two opposing camps, but the constitution of popular subjectivity constructs a political antagonism between the "people" and "power."

Laclau's third condition for populism is constitutive heterogeneity. As with the second condition, this is actually a corollary of the first and second ones, in that it entails "the consolidation of the equivalential chain through the construction of a popular identity which is something qualitatively more than the simple summation of the equivalential links" (Laclau, 2005, p. 77). The "plurality of social demands" are the material from which "a global identity" (p. 83) is constructed, but all of the elements are transformed in their articulation. This means both that the people is more than the sum of its parts and that the construction of the "people" is "an act of institution [that] creates a new agency out of a plurality of heterogeneous elements" (p. 224). As in the empty signifier, the "people" exceeds its parts because a particularity (a demand, a symbol, an idea) within it has come to stand for the people universally: "A partial content takes up the representation of a universality within which it is incommensurable" (p. 106). Laclau refers to this partial content of populism as "a *plebs* who claims to be the only legitimate *populus*" (as in "all power to the Soviets") (p. 82). The constitutive role of social heterogeneity, the making of a people from differences, is excessive in contrast to the impossible dream of a fully reconciled society, a homogeneity that always remains on the horizon as an absent presence (like the mother/child dyad).

"Naming is the key moment in the constitution of a 'people' " (Laclau, 2005, p. 227), the moment of popular unity being nominal (a matter of constituting an identity) rather than conceptual (composed of pre-given categories). As a particularity comes to be the part in the place of the totality, giving the "people" the name of this partiality has a retroactive effect of linking heterogeneous elements into equivalences, creating a

new social unity. Only at the point of naming does a "will of the people" emerge (p. 163), not as an aggregation of interests (as in the liberal pluralist model) or as the consequence of deliberative will formation, but through the representation of the people in a name. The "homogenizing" of "a heterogeneous mass" through representation and the creative act of naming means that homogeneity is not actually achieved, and that it is heterogeneity that is constitutive.

While this summary of Laclau's political theory of populism and the construction of the people as a political subjectivity is by no means comprehensive, it captures the key elements of his theory. The three conditions he lists, it turns out, refer to a set of theoretical decisions and assumptions concerning social heterogeneity, the relational (rather than "essential") nature of the elements comprising social groups and political movements, and the impossibility of a fully reconciled society (and hence a society identical with itself). Deploying a range of Gramscian, post-structuralist, psychoanalytical and rhetorical theories, he posits the people as a political subjectivity constituted in antagonistic relation to "power," through the equivalential articulation of social demands that are temporarily crystallized or hegemonized into a common popular identity through symbolic representations, empty (yet floating) signifiers, and a name. But is this formal theory of populism up to the task of explaining when and how some populist movements succeed and endure while others fail or fade quickly?

Accounting for populist success and failure

The chief value of Laclau's theory of populism is his insight that the "people" is not a given political subject but a subjectivity that is constituted relationally and discursively. Yet, when it comes to accounting for the successes and failures of processes and projects of the construction of the people, the elaborate, multilayered theory is unable to account for the contingency of the emergence of the people as a political subject. Laclau (2005) ascribes much of the contingency of populism to the "tension of the opposed logics of equivalence and difference" (p. 200), but he offers little guidance on the conditions under which one or other logic prevails.

In the case of late nineteenth-century American populism, Laclau (2005) notes that although the farmers were its backbone, by the time of the launch of the People's Party in 1892, the movement had in place "all the components . . . typical of the populist turn of politics: widespread disaffection with the existing status quo, incipient constitution

of an equivalential chain of demands centred on a few cathected symbols" (p. 203). The movement's problem, though, was "making the universalistic moment prevail over the particularistic one" (p. 203), which failed in part because in the movement's often Christian terminology, "'the plain people' meant those with white skin," thereby excluding Black people who as a heterogeneous element remained outside the possible "space of representation" (p. 204) of this populist identity. The Populist project of constructing a people around the empty signifier of the "producers," contrasted with idlers and parasites such as "trusts and combinations" (p. 206), failed in the elections of 1892 and 1894. The alternative offered by McKinley of a progressive society was instead able to attract many of those disaffected with the status quo but not sharing the social identities of the elites promoting it, by campaigning on themes such as "peace, progress, patriotism, and prosperity," along with the inclusion of all in a set of "new cultural norms that described gentility" (Goodwyn cited in Laclau, 2005, p. 207).

This account leaves unanswered why McKinley's alternative had more affective force than the Populists. It does not answer why the racist prejudices of identifiable social groups (white farmers) held their affective charge even though African-Americans could potentially have been articulated into "the people" as producers and Christians. Perhaps the strength of such prejudice could be explained by Laclau (2005) as the result of a prior hegemonic articulation, but the question remains as to its continuing force rather than form. The empty signifier of "producers," the naming of the "people" as such, the establishment of an internal, antagonistic frontier, were, in this case, insufficient to withstand the appropriation by the Populists' opponents of "producers" as a floating signifier, and "the dissolution of equivalential links and the differential incorporation of sectors within organic society" (p. 205). Clearly, some additional theorization is required to account for the strength of the cathectic investment in white identity relative to the equivalential logic of "producers" and the disarticulating, differential strategies of McKinley's campaign.

The case of Peronism in Argentina offers an example of populism whose "very success in constructing an almost unlimited chain of equivalence . . . led to the subversion of the principle of equivalence as such" (Laclau, 2005, p. 214). Laclau explains the success of the Peronist movement from the military coup of 1955 until "Perón's triumphant return" (p. 215) following his victory in the 1973 elections. He notes that "Argentina is an ethnically homogeneous country" with a concentrated urban population, thus attributing "immediate equivalential

impact" (p. 215) to factors whose strength and stability is accepted as a given rather than constantly discursively constructed as "ethnic homogeneity." Laclau also makes much of the underground manner in which Perón's messages circulated in Argentina during his exile and following the banning of the Peronist Party, so that there was no authoritative interpretation of them, allowing for "endless interpretations and reinterpretations" and hence for "his word" to be "indispensible in giving symbolic unity to those disparate struggles" (p. 216), ranging from armed insurrection to institutionalized trade union activity. Under these conditions, the anti-Peronist government could not integrate differentially the neo-Peronist groups and organizations who favored the latter type of activity. "The demand for Perón's return to Argentina became an empty signifier unifying an expanding popular camp" (p. 217), especially following the military coup of 1966.

Yet what at one moment appears as an enormous advantage for equivalential articulation and the constitution of popular political subjectivity, namely the undecidability of what Peronism meant, subsequently became a liability. Having meant all things to all people, after his return it became apparent that his name was very close to being an "*entirely* empty" signifier, of the sort that provides only a "fleeting popular identity" and no form of "institutional regularity" (Laclau, 2005, p. 217). There was no equivalence between left-wing and right-wing Peronism following the elections in 1973, allowing the military to take control again in 1976. This explanation is unsatisfactory because it is not at all clear why the deployment of the logic of difference or institutional politics between the 1959 legalization of the unions and the 1966 coup, which appealed to the neo-Peronist trade unions, did not disrupt the equivalential chain that depended on such an "empty" empty signifier. Laclau's formal terms do not explain how "Perón" was enough to keep politically opposed groups under one equivalential roof for 17 years and then how all the rhetorical, cathectic, discursive force of that partial object dissipated so quickly.

In these cases in which Laclau attempts to explain how the emergence of a people can fail as well as succeed, his accounts do indeed delve into historical contingencies. He follows his historical sources quite closely, such that his own theoretical framework does little explanatory work. Laclau has overelaborated some of the necessary and formal conditions at the expense of other contingent conditions. Laclau's theoretical apparatus gives the impression that there are identifiable variables and conditions for the construction of the people as a political subject, but the event of populism actually appears to be contingent on a range of

forces (affective, practical, institutional) that are either not accounted for in his theory or given as prior constructions. On the terms of the theory itself, he provides something of a tautological explanation: when the "people" emerges, it is because equivalence was established, but as the "people" is the corollary of political equivalence, we are none the wiser.

Writing before Laclau published *On Populist Reason*, Anna Marie Smith argued that Laclau's work in the 1990s had become increasingly formal and less historical as his theoretical influence became less Gramscian and more Lacanian. "Laclau sometimes gives the impression that a hegemonic discourse becomes compelling simply because of its abstract formal operation," an approach which is "problematic because it suppresses a historically specific analysis of the success and failure of rival political discourses" (Smith, 1998, pp. 168, 177). The abstract formal operation refers primarily to the psychoanalytic process of the partial object, or the empty signifier, Smith's point being that "the selection of one political discourse instead of another is . . . analogous to identification in psychoanalysis" (p. 77). In *On Populist Reason* Laclau continues to adhere to this Lacanian reasoning, but he does not regard it as analogical but ontological. Laclau takes what might be a useful analogy and makes of it an ontology.

Smith prefers Laclau's earlier, more Gramscian work, in which he recognizes the limits established by the popular traditions at play, attending to both the form and content of competing political discourse (rather than a formal tension between competing political logics) and constructing "historically specific maps" (Smith, 1998, p. 83). Laclau's analyses of specific historical examples of populism refer to such maps and political traditions, but, in doing so, lose connection with much of his theoretical apparatus, especially its psychoanalytical and formalist aspects which are least given to historical specificity. Smith's criticism, which concurs with Stavrakakis' (2004) concerns about Laclau's formalism, indicates some of the difficulties that Laclau's theory encounters when accounting for the construction of the people. Laclau's notion of the discursive construction of the people as a political subject needs not only more historical specificity, but also a clearer theorization of the factors involved in the contingency of discursive construction.

In principle, the notion of discourse with which Laclau works "rejects the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices" and "the linguistic and behavioural aspects of a social practice" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 107). Criticizing Foucault's distinction between discursive and non-discursive aspects of practice, Laclau and Mouffe insist that "institutions, techniques, productive organizations" could not "constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence"

(pp. 107–8). Granted, a human subject such as the "delinquent" is constructed discursively in differential relation to "normal" citizens and can only exist and be represented as such through discourses of the human sciences. But Foucault's genealogy of the discursive construction of delinquency theorizes not only those discourses but the practices of confinement, spatial distribution, examination, observation and all the institutions of discipline in general that constitute carceral society (Foucault 1979). Similarly, Laclau's accounts of the discursive construction of "the people," which perhaps we should conceive better as its constant deconstructions and reconstructions in the struggles between hegemonic projects, require more theorization of those practices that are less concerned with the conditions of possibility of representation of "the people" than its practical constitution. Among those practices are those of media politics and popular culture.

Mediated construction of the people

I have undertaken a partial critique of Laclau's political theory of populism in order to introduce an argument that among the additional practices and institutions that should be foregrounded in theorizing the discursive construction of "the people" are the mediated and cultural relations that account for the transmission (in the sense used by Debray, 2000) of political discourses and ideas, affective investments, and shared identifications. Without an understanding of the mass mediated quality of relations and logics of equivalence (and difference), as well as the connection between cultural and political subjectivity, it is impossible to grasp how popular political subjectivity is constructed, to trace the "*unevenness of power*" that is constitutive of hegemony (Laclau, 2001, p. 7), and to understand why certain hegemonic formations of "the people" succeed at certain times while others do not.

Laclau himself gives a clue to the centrality of media institutions in constituting the people's political subjectivity in his discussion of Tarde, who introduces a distinction between the pre-modern crowd and the modern public whose cohesion is mental rather than physical. Such cohesion rests on "the joint action of three inventions interacting with each other, the printing press, railways, telegraph" (Tarde cited in Laclau, 2005, p. 45). Just as the notion of "the public" added a key concept to the mass psychology literature, so would it add a key element to Laclau's theory of populism.

There is a fundamental link between the existence of the democratic public and the media, as media theorists are well aware. Peter Dahlgren

(1991) outlined a productive line of research two decades ago in his statement that: "The development of mass-based democracy in the west coincided historically with the emergence of the mass media as the dominant institutions of the public sphere" (p. 1). He adds that media are "central agents in the shaping of publics" which "emerge in the discursive interaction of citizens" (p. 16). A similar point is made more emphatically by John Hartley (1996), whose focus on the radical press of the French Revolution leads him to conclude that: "The public of modernity is coterminous with the readerships of the media, and the contemporary media developed as a means to call certain types of public into being" (Hartley, 1996, p. 54). Print media first enabled the dissemination of ideas and information to literate citizens, but it was the development of the broadcast media that did most to knit together the multitude of citizens into a collection of publics. Today's publics are necessarily mediated publics. When a relation of democratic equivalence is articulated across a wide assemblage of audiences, it is journalism or the media in general which organize the articulation (Hartley, 1996, p. 109).

Conceptualizing the people also as a mediated public highlights some key barriers to the construction of the people as a political subject and the success of populism. Given the continuing segmentation of audiences even at the time of their globalization, as well as the emergence of alternative dynamic public spheres in contrast to the mainstream, the public is not usually constituted as a single bloc (Dahlgren, 1991, pp. 12–15). The public is sometimes constituted as a single entity (the nation, or the people) but more often as a series of sectors, ranging from ethnic groups, professions, age groups such as pensioners, or broad perceived interests such as "business," to virtual categories whose vote is considered pivotal, such as "middle England." The public is organized according to sectors and categories, but also as audiences of different media, of different genres within those media, and of different options as well as cultural tastes and identities within the genres and media. Such mediated publics are not the only publics of contemporary democracies, but they are the building blocks for hegemonic struggles that attempt to articulate them into the public as "the people."

The Tea Party in the USA today is generally understood to be a right-wing populist movement that pits the "American people" against big money, big government, Washington and Obama. Yet it is currently (as of October 2010) unable to articulate all current anti-status quo social demands not only because, like its predecessors, it defends many aspects of the social status quo, but also because it is tied so closely to the particular public that is the audience of Fox News, which openly advocates

the movement (Calderone, 2009; Rich, 2009). Given the obstacles of segmented media audiences, the ideas and affective charge of the Tea Party would need to be disseminated through additional channels to become popular. For all the affective force of the Tea Party, the particular mediated organization of that affect is both a strength and barrier to its broader hegemonization.

Laclau understands that as societies become "highly institutionalized . . . equivalential logics have less terrain on which to operate; as a result . . . populism does indeed become almost synonymous with petty demagogy" (2005, p. 191). It would certainly be productive to theorize media and other institutionalization in a way that accounts better for the more frequent and current populist phenomena in which a partial "people" emerges on one side of an antagonistic frontier, on the other side of which is not "the power bloc" but whole swathes – and even a majority – of the population. An example of this would be Sarah Palin's distinction between "the real America" (which overlaps considerably with Fox News' audience) and the rest of America.

In addition to more focus on the institutions and channels of political communication, theorization of populism should also attend to the mediated character of popular culture, because that is the terrain in which popular cultural subjectivity and identity is constructed and in which much of the affective force of "the popular" operates. Laclau recognizes that political subjectivity is constituted within a "wider 'way of living'" (2005, p. 169), reference to which should foreground "the *material* character of every structure," as in the forms of life that undergird Wittgenstein's language games (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 108). Culture, and especially mediated popular culture, comprises much of that wider way of living, yet Laclau pays little attention to it. Oliver Marchart laments the drifting apart of discourse theory and cultural studies despite a shared Gramscian background, noting that, as a result, discourse theory has focused on macro-politics at the expense of the "micro-political level of the *popular*." The two need to be integrated because "it is within the hegemonic imaginary of a given society that the popular and politics . . . is articulated" (Marchart, 2002, p. 814). Similarly, De Cleen and Carpentier (2010, p. 177) point out that political populism and popular culture share a nodal point in their construction of the popular. In general, it certainly makes sense to analyse political populism and popular culture in conjunction with each other.

The popular culture of print media, cinema, radio, TV, recorded music, video and the Internet are almost synonymous with the growth of communications technologies that could reach the whole people.

Communications technologies are crucial for constituting the people because they mediate between the general sphere of popular culture and the narrower domain of formal government that exists within "a democratized mediasphere" (Hartley, 1996, p. 29). People become citizens and are constituted as political subjects by means of cultural practices and mediating technologies that connect them, whether differentially or equivalentially.

The domain of popular culture is also where the affective force of equivalential ties is organized. The work of cultural studies scholar Lawrence Grossberg is instructive on this point, in that he provides contextualized historical maps that relate contingent politically charged affects to specific cultural practices such as rock music. His theoretical apparatus is varied, but includes Laclau's (as well as Foucault's) discourse theory, especially the notion of articulation, which he defines as "the process of forging connections between practices and effects" and a "continuous struggle to reposition practices within a shifting field of forces" (Grossberg, 1992, pp. 53–4). Following Stuart Hall, Grossberg concerns himself with the "construction of the popular" as "the site of an ongoing struggle" (p. 77). Although Grossberg refers not to the construction of "the people," but to what counts as popular culture, he is as insistent as Laclau that there is no fixed referent for "the people" or for the practices that constitute popular culture. In Grossberg's terms, the broader context for political practice is a "cultural formation" that is "a historical articulation, an accumulation or organization of practices" that connects effects to social groups (Grossberg, 1992, p. 70). Such connections, which involve identification, work through the pleasures of popular culture, of "affect," which "identifies the strength of the investment which anchors people in particular experiences, practices, identities, meanings and pleasures" (p. 92). Grossberg deploys a Deleuzian rather than Lacanian notion of affect, which enables him to analyse the social dispersal of affect as desire rather than only the drives, which involve "a radical investment in a partial object" (Laclau, 2005, p. 226). While Laclau would no doubt reject such a departure from the Lacanian bedrock of his theory, a Deleuzian approach to affect would cast more light on the complexities, instabilities, and conflicts between popular investments in diverse practices and pleasures, rather than in the relatively few fixed partial objects or empty signifiers that are characteristic of less institutionalized societies.

Just as populism can range in its political effects from radical democratic to fascist, so can the affective relations of popular culture potentially be either "the condition of possibility . . . for any struggle to change

the world" or "articulated into repressive and even totalitarian demands" (Grossberg, 1992, pp. 86–7). By mapping what matters affectively, Grossberg's analysis of rock as a mood of non-conformism within a culture of consumption and mobility pinpoints the limits of its articulation to radical, transformative politics, such as its sexism, its compliance with racism, and its identification with capitalist materialism. Rock's apparent counter-hegemonic potential was sustained and amplified when it was labeled as "radical" by the new conservatism of the 1980s whose "disciplined mobilization" (p. 294) of everyday life targeted counter-cultural trends of the 1960s. Rock, then, is not so much a floating signifier as a floating affective investment, one whose sedimented historical articulations mean that while it carries an air of radicalness it could not serve as the nodal point of a transformative cultural politics at the conjuncture Grossberg analysed.

De Cleen and Carpentier (2010) provide an insightful account of a left-wing Belgian organization, 0110, which grasped the political limitations of rock's articulations. In its organization of music concerts in 2006 in support of tolerance to challenge the Flemish right-wing populist party Vlaams Belang, 0110 featured popular musical genres that, unlike rock, articulate with the sort of traditional, folkish sense of popular culture that would otherwise seem to be associated with the populism of Vlaams Belang. 0110 thereby disarticulated Vlaams Belang from "the people" as a signifier by articulating Flemish "popular" music with other popular music genres. Their account is marred by an assumption that popular culture is built around a fundamental antagonism between people and elite, whereas it is actually characterized by competing but not necessarily antagonistic popular genres that have their own audiences and genres. But the key point stands that particular popular cultural practices have no inherent political articulation but can variously be articulated with differing forms of political populism.

In addition to more focus on the wider way of life within which affective investments form in popular culture, and which explain the force rather than the form of popular political investments, Laclau needs a better account of how political ideas take root. How does "equality" or "democracy" catch on as a symbol and signifier to which a whole set of social demands are attached? A valuable addition in this regard would be Régis Debray's (2000) mediology, which deliberately breaks with the terminology of communication. Debray prefers the notion of transmission to refer to the dissemination of durable meanings, or stores of externalized memory, in adherence to which group membership is established. Stressing the material aspects of cultural transmission, Debray analyses

not only the semiotic modes of communication, but also their forms of distribution, their material bases and means of transportation. He considers religious, political, and cultural ideas in struggle with each other for survival (or hegemony), his favourite examples being the Church's transformation of a Jewish sect into a world religion and the Communist Party's institutionalization of Marxism. If culture is the "repertory of forms, intuitive schemas, and corporealized memories every society makes available to its members" (p. 52), then the wider way of life within which certain ideas become hegemonic is inherited, enduring over time. Moreover, Debray claims that "the object transmitted does not pre-exist the process of its transmission" (p. 18), referring to the Christian church's invention of Christ but in a sense that applies also to the co-emergence of the press, the public, and the "people" of democracy noted above. In order to account for how some political ideas become hegemonic, Laclau's theory would benefit from a mediological approach that would study how the ideas of the French Revolution were organized, considering the public space in which equivalential logics operate in conjunctions with "the workings of any recognizable technocultural systems in movement" (p. 113). Debray can fill in the detail that Laclau assumes when he takes ideas to be material forces, by explaining which ideas have spread further and endure longer.

Conclusion

Laclau poses a crucial question for politics, one that is also central to media politics: how is "the people" constituted as a political subjectivity? His discourse theory provides useful tools for conceiving and analysing the discursive construction of the people through the play of the hegemonic logic of equivalence of social demands, symbolic representations, and social identities. Yet, his own accounts of populism tend to redescribe events in his formal terms, rather than provide a set of conditions and variables that explain when the "people" is constituted equivalentially or when the logic of difference prevails. At the same time, when Laclau does offer historical detail and background, it is not integrated well with his theoretical terms, such that historical conjuncture then carries most of the burden of accounting for the emergence, or not, of populism. This chapter argues that Laclau's valuable discourse theory would be improved by integrating it with theoretical supplements that can account for successful and stable hegemonic articulations through which the "people" is constituted (or not). In particular, his model of the discursive construction of the people would benefit from a media

theory approach to the mediated character of the public, a cultural studies approach to the affective force of popular identities and the wider way of life in which popular investments occur, and a mediological approach to the transmission of political ideas. Discourse theory, in conjunction with media theory, would then be able to account for the mediated construction of the people. In turn, critical media theory would find itself at the heart of contemporary political theory's understanding of political subjectivity, populism, and democracy's regressive tendencies and progressive potential.

Note

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10

Mobilizing Discourse Theory for Critical Media Politics: Obstacles and Potentials[1]

Peter Dahlgren

Introduction

Traditional appeals to established methodologies for acquiring knowledge about the world have increasingly lost their compelling quality; we have become all too aware of the issues and pitfalls involved in applying any given approach. We understand that any methodological platform, any set of premises and assumptions about how to proceed, or about our conceptual framework, is always already embedded and implicated in particular worldviews and social arrangements. While the difficulties of relativism and historicism have always been a nagging thorn in the side of social research, our sensitivities to them have been heightened in the past couple of decades, as the ripples of philosophical reflection, not least of the post-structuralist variety, has spread across the waters of academic research. And, in these waters, we are all in a sense in the same boat: there is no one ultimate perspective or solution. Or at least such is the case for those who allow for sufficient critical self-reflection.

Thus, while every researcher and scholar usually has his/her own favorite ways of doing things, each of us is always positioned in the face of uncertainty. If we add to these epistemological (and ontological) issues the additional difficulties in maintaining a functional political compass for critical research, successful navigation can become quite daunting. For, despite specific progressive developments here and there, the present historical situation is dire. Democracy is on the defensive in most places, and the inventory of global desperation is played out in endless local, national, and regional settings. We are constantly forced to ask ourselves how best to proceed, and, specifically, what research we should be doing, and how we should be doing it.

Against this backdrop, the foregoing chapters in this volume are a very welcome contribution to the collective discussions about the what

and the how of contemporary critical research. We have here a set of efforts to establish, as well as to further develop, the existing bridges between discourse theory (DT) and critical media politics (CMP). DT, as represented foremost by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, is at bottom a philosophical enterprise, but one with a self-conscious political commitment – and a growing sense of the need to connect more explicitly with the media (see, for example, Carpentier and Cammaerts' interview with Chantal Mouffe, 2006). CMP can be seen as an amalgamation of strands from a variety of academic fields and disciplines that has, as its point of departure, the media as the site of politics and the political in contemporary society – that is, as terrains of social practices. For many who do research in this area, the question of what "critical" research means in the contemporary context, and how it should be done, looms as a nagging issue.

There is no simple synthesis that both camps can rally around; rather, we have here the start of an open, problematizing dialogue. Glynos and Howarth (2007), in their recent probing of post-structuralist theory to elucidate better methodological grounding for social research, call for an ethos of "agonistic respect" across disciplines and theoretical perspectives. I will try to maintain that spirit in what follows. My aim here, with inspiration from the above chapters, is to further explore from my own horizons – largely CPM in character, but with a modest anchoring in DT – the potential and the problems of this *rapprochement*.

I begin with a few reflections on the current character of DT, from the perspective of an outsider. Then I move on, in the second section, to highlight aspects of DT that are, or at least might be, recognizable from the horizons of CMP researchers. This can be seen as an exercise in "estrangement reduction." In the third section, I explore potential common ground via a snapshot of media research and its critical strands, as well as through the classical concepts of critique and ideology. The fourth section reflects on the contributions in the previous chapters, as an attempt to take stock of where we have now arrived. In the concluding section, I look at DT as a complex ensemble with three dimensions, yet offering a potentially useful toolkit for the empirical analysis of CMP.

Discourse theory: Promising, yet still at the margins

Cards on the table

I'm writing from the perspective of critical media research, with a strong emphasis on notions such as democracy, citizenship, and participation,

informed by contemporary late modern social, political, and cultural theory. When I first read Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (*HSS*) in the late 1980s, I was a bit stumped by its complex conceptual framework. Yet I intuitively sensed there was something very fertile here, an effort to incorporate the advances of post-structuralist thought into an explicitly critical paradigm. This initiative acknowledges the importance of the Marxist tradition, but goes beyond its impasses, not least the singular focus on class as the key to understanding all the dynamics of exploitation and subordination in the modern world. Class structures had not evaporated in the 1980s, and they are still with us today, though in forms that differ in a number of ways from nineteenth-century capitalist society. However, Laclau and Mouffe, along with a number of other critical theorists of various persuasions (for example, feminists), were arguing that there are other kinds of relationships beyond class that need to be confronted.

Of their post-*HSS* work, I have made use of Mouffe's perspectives, and only recently begun to grapple with Laclau's texts. I find his writing potentially very useful for doing work in CMP, a view obviously shared by the other contributors to this book. The Introduction by the editors, and Chapter 2 by Lincoln Dahlberg, map out the contours of the mutual terrain in an edifying manner. Moreover, the references provided show that, even beyond this volume, there are already instructive instances of at least CMP making use of DT; Nico Carpentier and his colleagues (Carpentier, 2005; Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007; Carpentier & Spinoy, 2008) are notable examples in this regard. Moreover, given the little attention that DT has devoted to the media, to the mediatization of politics, and to media practices of all kinds, and given the centrality of the media to politics and the political in late modern society, DT will gain much by continuing the discussion.

Mutual benefit: A delayed potential

If we consider that a quarter of a century has passed since the publication of *HSS*, we need to reflect on why its presence and application within CMP remain so limited, when at the same time, a close look would suggest that the connections are obvious. It is true that DT has been "regularly" cited by CMR researchers, as Phelan and Dahlberg state in Chapter 1. But we should also keep in mind that in terms of CMP research generally it has a meager presence. A quick glance at DT can suggest to us why CMP researchers have been slow in appropriating DT. The first thing that "outsiders" to DT react against is, unsurprisingly, the densely abstract character of the work. Norman Geras (1987, 1988) was indignant about

the departure from traditional Marxism (an indignation that was, however, not so constructive), and yet he was also exasperated by the mode of exposition, a sentiment for which one can have a little more sympathy.

The text is basically philosophical and conceptual; one could call it "theoretical," but social theory usually has phenomena in the "real world" as its referents. While the social and political world is, of course, present in this volume, much of the discussion turns on the fine-tuning of concepts and the relationships between them. DT is easily perceived as a rather inaccessible body of knowledge that is the prerogative of a highly specialized group of scholars working in a highly specialized area.

As one proceeds through the chapters in this text, it is not immediately obvious what the payoff will be – what is the "value added" that this challenging body of thought will offer, compared to those traditions with which most CMP researchers are familiar? Gradually it becomes clear that there is an important ontological argument going on, about the inseparability of linguistic and material practices. Yet here one can easily slip into a sceptical mode: not just about this particular argument ("But isn't language distinct from other forms of human practice?"), but even about the relevance of ontology in general ("Aren't we all in a postmodern mode now? And isn't ontology about essentialism . . . and do we really need that?").

Further, as Phelan and Dahlberg make explicit in their Introduction, there is a problem with the notion of "discourse." While "discourse analysis" has become ubiquitous among CMP researchers and media studies more generally, "discourse theory" is indeed something else. That "discourse" in this usage is not limited to language, but includes social practices, puts a stick into the spokes of many researchers' mental bicycles, generating a good deal of confusion. Again, from the CMP side, it is not so immediately clear that the effort to readjust one's view of this already very slippery concept will yield much in the way of an analytic benefit. In hindsight, one may speculate that the problem could have been avoided had another rubric been applied to this tradition, perhaps radical equivalence theory, or articulation theory, as DeLuca (1999) has already suggested.

Most approaches to discourse, not least Fairclough's, underscore that the linguistic takes place in social contexts, and is related to social practices (see further discussion in Chapter 1 of this book). It is here, in this dialectical interface, that meaning arises. The linguistic and the material must therefore be understood as inseparable, at least in analytical – if not formal ontological – terms. Laclau and Mouffe begin from the other direction: DT sees discourse as both linguistic and material – indeed, they render the linguistic/material distinction incoherent by emphasizing the inherent materiality of language. At the same time, they note how

discourse theory has a specifically semiotic dimension rooted in structural linguistics, even if Laclau (2004) would distance himself from narrowly semiotic readings of his work. In the end, even if some finer differences remain, one wonders if there is seemingly such a fundamental incompatibility on this point, especially if viewed from the practicalities of doing CMP research? (From a rigorous DT-philosophical horizon, this will no doubt be seen as glib and inaccurate.)

Gleaning methodology

HSS does not immediately offer much in the way of a handy methodology, and generally DT's methodological side remains a challenge, though it is gradually coming into view, as engaged scholars appropriate the conceptual apparatus for concrete analyses. But it doesn't come easy. Phelan and Dahlberg clarify the methodological disposition of DT in the Introduction, by evoking Glynos and Howarth's (2007) conception of DT as concerned about "'problematizing' . . . the conditions of (im)possibility underpinning the construction of any research object." Thus Phelan and Dahlberg suggest that, "in that respect, we are less concerned with the question of systematic method-led applications than in critically exploring discourse theory's value, and possible limitations, as a critical theoretical framework for focusing methodological attention on the 'radically contingent' and 'contextualized' nature of social and media practices." In this way, DT foregrounds the radical contingency of social practices and objects, "the 'being' of which needs to be explained by the analyst rather than simply assumed as real . . . To presuppose radical contingency means accepting that there is no final, absolute ground, foundation or essence, *except* for contingency itself."

Elucidating radical contingency is a key goal of DT, and can be seen as a kind of meta-methodological stance or disposition. However, as DT picks apart the pieces of any socio-political-media phenomena, and indicates the ways these lack foundation and are predicated on specific and shifting historical circumstances, I wager many researchers within CMP would be puzzled about the point of it. Virtually none would argue against the contingency principle; indeed, "context," "situatedness," and even "contingency" are a standard part of the CMP literature already, though usually without the kind of rigorous philosophical framing that DT provides. Thus, CMP researchers may wonder what new results could arise from such a methodological stance.

Such deconstruction of taken-for-granted ways of seeing is an important "moment" in critical research; yet researchers in the fields of CMP also have a strong tradition of methodological approaches grounded in

the conjunctural positivity of media and social practices. Some of these approaches are quite theoretically robust and should not be dismissed as mere empiricism. Many critical researchers, while shunning the instrumental demands to be useful for the corporate sector or managerial decision-making, still want to be useful for progressive politics, to link up with practice and align themselves with normative political prescriptions. This often requires some kind of "positive knowledge" beyond the insight of historical contingency.

It is thus important that DT can help specify, or connect with, possible research interventions – otherwise it may risk being perceived merely as a late modern version of the stance implicit in Adorno's quip that the "The whole is untrue." Such may indeed be the case, but we still need to try to understand it and deal with this pervasive untruth as best we can. Confronting difficult political situations with research can involve interventions in policy-making processes, making significant pedagogic contributions, or helping networks, social movements, or other activists in some productive way. DT must somehow connect with this.

My sense is that DT shares this view of the importance of practice while at the same time its commitments, its professional engagement at the philosophical level, tend to situate it a few steps removed from the practical questions of relevant research. Here lies an important gap to be bridged. DT has, as I have suggested, a good deal to offer CMP, especially in today's situation where the need for a reinvigorated post-Marxist left is intense, and where the new media landscape allows for a much wider array of practices among people than the previous mass media regime did. (There is an extensive literature on the use of new media for progressive political purposes; a recent example is the two-volume set by Rodriguez et al., 2010 and Stein et al., 2009).

In this section, I have emphasized some attributes of DT that may make CMP researchers see it as remote from their concerns. In the next section, I switch footing, and strive to reduce its perceived exotic quality by highlighting those aspects that are in fact quite likely to be familiar to people working in CMP, and likely to resonate with many of their core assumptions and ways of working.

Connecting the dots

Sociological antecedents

Chapters 1 and 2 in this volume underscore that Laclau's work has a number of intellectual antecedents, and that he is clear and open about

the intertextual character of his writing. I'd like to extend that discussion in a manner that I hope will have some pedagogic import. I want to put the spotlight on some links between the intellectual currents in his work and traditions likely to be familiar within CMP, including sociological traditions that Laclau would typically oppose (for further discussion of Laclau's dismissive view of sociology, see Chapters 1 and 6). There is much that is original in Laclau (and Mouffe), if made more visible, can shed better light on the project of DT and its relevance for CMP. Given the limits of space I will not go into much detail here, nor cite from Laclau's texts; what follows is simply a brief inventory.

We can begin with a familiar tradition that first developed within sociology, and also spread to a number of other fields, namely social constructionism; a key text here is that of Berger and Luckmann (1967). When it first emerged in the mid-1960s, this perspective was often contested, but gradually became "normalized." Today this general framework has become adapted and integrated within many fields. The notion that our "reality" is based on the meaning that we "construct" via our sense-making in everyday experiences, through language, resonates loosely with DT. We might even venture an additional argument here: that Berger and Luckmann's perspective in its own way assumed – without making a big theoretical point about it – the inseparability of language use from other forms of practice.

However, we should note here an important difference between DT and the perspective of Berger and Luckmann: in social constructionism, the "social" is constructed in a seemingly non-political, anthropological social universe. Berger and Luckmann do not engage much with the political, except to acknowledge that sets of overarching dominant ideas can shape the meaning-making in the micro-processes of everyday life. Laclau is, of course, explicitly political in his work, and, moreover, asserts that the political precedes the social: in his view, even the terms, categories, and typifications that we use in our everyday construction of the social world are already implicated in power relations.

Philosophical parallels

Laclau, at least in his early work, was strongly inspired by Foucault, who, in turn, has some significant Nietzschian roots. In the late nineteenth century, Nietzsche was writing about, among other things, power and knowledge. Nietzsche can be seen as a forerunner of post-structuralism, with his insistence that knowledge, as it becomes codified and institutionalized, becomes inseparable from the exercise of social power. And, likewise, the exercise of power is in part dependent upon the

mobilization of legitimated forms of knowledge. Thus, "knowledge" is not simply a neutral state of cognitive competence about the world, but rather is implicated in the social relations of power; in other words, the limits and the modalities of our knowing are ultimately political in character.

Foucault finds power functioning in settings and modes of thought normally deemed untainted by power. He invites critical interrogation of social and cultural institutions; several of his studies show how such structures operate not just to enable but also to constrain people. He demonstrates that institutionalized power relations involve the constitution of a field of knowledge. And again: all knowledge presupposes and constitutes social power relations. Further, power, per se, is not negative, but an element of all social relations. Subjects are thus constituted, at least in part, as the effects and consequences of power.

These themes are all present in DT. To broaden the picture a bit, we can note that Paul Ricoeur calls Nietzsche, along with Marx and Freud, one of the grand "masters of suspicion" of modern thought, a critical analyst who pried behind the surface of appearances. The world is not always as it might seem on the empirical surface; such is also the case with our inner selves, as Freud would add – and DT also makes use of psychoanalytic theory. Moreover, there are systematic mechanisms of concealment at work, not only in regard to power, but also concerning conflict, desire, and social relations. In fact, much of the reality about the social (and psychic) world is occluded, an important general premise in DT – even if, for Laclau, this argument has the additional component that there can never be any full "revelation," since there can never be a full positive identity.

Extending this perspective, DT asserts that all our knowledge, and the discursive modalities that it takes, is radically contingent, predicated on particular circumstances; no human practice exists outside the specific contexts that both make them possible and delimit them.

Here DT clearly shares elements with other currents in twentieth-century philosophy that explore the non-foundational character of our knowing; relativism and historicism have become established motifs amongst an array of thinkers, from the later Wittgenstein to Rorty, among others. The hermeneutic tradition of Gadamer and Ricoeur – also an anti-positivist trajectory – underscores in a related manner the situatedness of interpretation: we can only make sense of things (including language) from the horizons of our own position. Thus, truth claims must always be contingent, and remain provisional until a "better" interpretation comes along. This view, however, is premised on the possibility of some

kind of shared rational discourse where the interlocutors, theoretically at least, have access to some intersubjective frameworks, a perspective that Laclau, once again, would reject given his inherently antagonistic conception of discourse and identity.

The contours of the subject in DT are generally recognizable from related strands of late modern theory. Themes of the unconscious, about the social contingency of subjectivity, the shifting character of identity, are already familiar. The multidimensional, often internally divided "self" who can shift between different discourses in different contexts manifests a prismatic identity that has no essential core and can never be fully fixed. We can add here that DT's view of the linguistic resources the subject has at her disposal – within a context of sedimented constraints – is congruent with this view. DT encompasses the general post-structuralist perspective on meaning, as manifested, for example, in the later Barthes's semiology and in Derrida's deconstructive stance. Meaning is fluid and contingent upon the "play of signifiers" with each other, and thus never fully decided (always to some extent "deferred," as Derrida says).

Laclau and Mouffe strongly emphasize this lack of "fixity" of meaning, and refer at times to the idea of "floating signifiers," which are, at bottom, empty of any meaning beyond that which is politically achieved. However, they also add that we always have an array of temporary "nodal points" where meaning becomes socially stabilized, at least for a while; a total lack of fixity, they claim, would result in psychosis. However, meaning is not just constructed and reconstructed, it is many times contested: their concept of antagonism centers on the conflict over meanings, definitions, and identities. It is here where politics arises. Prevailing (hegemonic) meanings and identities can be contested, and at times are dislodged, or dissipated, via what they call "dislocation."

Much of all this should be familiar from the (very loosely defined) body of thought we call cultural studies. Armed with a working vocabulary that includes such concepts as contingency, polysemy, heterogeneity, anti-foundationalism, multiple identities, and with its emphasis on how power is embedded in meaning, cultural studies manifests a number of shared intellectual roots and concerns with DT; we can connect a lot of dots between the two. We should not forget, however, that cultural studies is an amorphous, eclectic field with ingredients from many directions, while DT, though it derives from several common roots, has been tempered into a conceptually rigorous and well-defined philosophical endeavor.

Public spheres and political identities

In Chapter 2, Lincoln Dahlberg takes up the theme of DT's emphasis on radical contingency, arguing that it "cannot provide positive normative grounds and criteria for the critique and guidance of media practices – grounds and criteria that many media theorists and researchers desire." As I indicated above, this stance may seem somewhat offputting to some CMP scholars, who want to develop alternative practices and institutions, yet Dahlberg clarifies that DT has other things to offer; it can be helpful in other ways, by:

> asking us to examine the conditions upon which given identities, meanings, practices, and institutions have become possible, and what relations of power sustain them and thus the current social order. Discourse theory thus opens a space for thinking and doing otherwise. It allows for, indeed encourages, the questioning of ultimate ends, in contrast to technocratic, instrumental questioning that focuses on the means to achieve an assumed fixed end, a given social system.

It seems that there is more to the focus on radical contingency than merely stripping away a façade. In the spirit of classic critical theory, DT offers a form of analytic practice that encourages us to look beyond the surfaces and to probe the factors that maintain particular existing arrangements – with the aim of "thinking and doing otherwise." It invites us to imaginatively envision alternatives, and explore what conditions might be necessary for their realization. In principle, then, DT can be seen as one stage of several in any given project. It may well be followed up by more traditional research approaches aimed precisely at developing alternative structures, via instrumental strategies. Thus, DT should be seen as playing a very specific – and, one might add, delimited – role. It cannot do everything; its strength lies in a particular phase or moment, of research and politics. In that sense, we could say that it invites interfaces, to be complemented with other approaches and practices.

The relevance for CMP comes into view as we follow Dahlberg's discussion about the public sphere. As he indicates, the traditional Habermasian public sphere has a number of elements that are quite congruent with DT – for example, the notion of agonistic publics debating issues and trying to form opinions about them. However, this model of the public sphere has also been criticized from a variety of corners: there have been calls for subaltern counter-public spheres; others have challenged the

idea of rational deliberative democracy and the goal of consensus, arguing that such principles serve as constrictive and, indeed, even exclusionary mechanisms. Such critiques (by Fraser, 1992, among others) are also very much in line with DT's own perspectives. Dahlberg suggests that DT, however, has one more important angle to offer, namely what is called "chains of equivalences." These have to do with coordinating the efforts of various political actors such that they come to discursively define the problems – and especially the "antagonists" – in ways that facilitate the building of alliances and coalitions. It involves linking together social and political demands to generate stronger "counter-hegemonies," even while risking a dilution of platforms for the individual groups.

We see this at work in the alternative public spheres of, for example, the World Social Forum, where a broad array of groups representing political engagement with diverse questions such as human rights, ecology, gender issues, and economic justice, strive to align themselves so that they can present a stronger, more united front against neoliberal globalization. Thus, in the online spaces that to a large extent constitute the sites of their alternative public spheres, these political actors try to discursively generate the "chains" that link them together in common projects. Analytically reflecting on such possibilities neatly exemplifies the stance that DT advocates, to critically reflect on what is, in order to imagine better alternatives that can constitute politically progressive steps forward.

Public spheres need not only communicative spaces to function; they also need the involvement of civic actors to make them viable. Among the recurring discussions in the contemporary condition of democracy is the frustration expressed in many quarters that more citizens need to become engaged. I have been addressing this theme in my own work (see Dahlgren, 2009), and have argued that civic agency is predicated on some sense of civic identity – that people in some way must be able to see themselves as participants who feel that some kind of political activity is meaningful. Such civic identities must be fueled by larger "civic cultures," and I suggest that the media play important – and very varying – roles in promoting or inhibiting civic cultures and agency. Here DT could be mobilized to further explore these processes.

What these short reflections suggest is that we should be wary of a priori notions of the public sphere, the political, and civic identities. With DT, public spheres become not just sites of political communication, but rather the spaces that discursively construct specific political subjectivities, with all their complexities and contradictions. Armed with

such perspectives, it becomes possible to study the discursive/media environment of specific groups of citizens, examining what subject positions are offered. One can incorporate analyses of linguistic and extra-linguistic factors, elucidating what can promote political engagement generally, but also, more specifically, the political positions that are pertinent for the specific groups. DT's general skepticism toward established conceptual categories, its emphasis on contingencies and its alertness toward manifestations of antagonism can serve us well in thinking about not only why things are the way they are, but also how they might be instead, and what might engender the changes.

Finally, I would note that in the discussions about political antagonisms, Laclau and Mouffe mention agonism, evoking the notion of democratic debate in the ancient Greek forums. There is, in my view, a built-in democratic ethic in DT that aligns itself with democratic norms. In democratic politics, we should strive to have political adversaries, not enemies, in other words, there should be rules of the game that all can follow, instead of resorting to violence. This is not so well developed in *HSS* or Laclau's latter work but comes out more explicitly in Mouffe's work on radical democracy; I will return to this theme below.

Probing the commonalities

Critical media research connections: An historical glimpse

To further probe the possible *rapprochement* between DT and CMP, it may help to look a bit more closely at the latter. If we think in terms of academic terrain, CMP encompasses people working in a range of academic contexts, chiefly politics and media studies, though each in turn can have a variety of subdivisions. In politics, or political science (broadly understood), there is a strong and reasonably cohesive mainstream. We find a number of small "maverick" streams that challenge the dominant theoretical and methodological assumptions of political sciences from the inside, but they remain largely on the margins.

On the side of media and communication research, the picture is a bit messier, given that the field is more eclectic. I want to very briefly sketch the field, drawing out, in particular, the various critical traditions that have emerged, since these are important for understanding the potential for a fruitful interface with DT. In simple terms, we can note that there has long been a mainstream perspective or paradigm in media research – since the 1950s and 1960s in the US, and later in Europe and elsewhere – whose intellectual underpinnings are found

chiefly within American sociology, psychology, social psychology, and political science. These are the foundations of empirical research in what used to be called "mass communication" in the pre-Internet era.

The focus of the mainstream approach was often oriented toward the content analysis of media messages and especially their effects and influences on audiences. The hybrid subfield of political communication – hovering between political science and media studies – manifests this as well, with its concerns about topics such as opinion measurement, the analysis of political messages, and journalistic coverage of politics. The "golden age" of this research lasted until about the mid-1970s, when it began to feel the challenges put forth by newer currents. However, the paradigm has evolved and remains basically intact, surrounded by a number of alternative tendencies. In fact, one could say it is making a comeback, as the market for "useful" media research about the "effects" and "influences" grows with the expanding media landscape. Armed with ever more sophisticated methodologies of analysis, such research can serve the increasing number of political and economic actors who require feedback on their media strategies. The growth of political PR and spin are part of this development. Positivism's obituary may have been premature.

During the late 1960s, critical traditions were beginning to make themselves felt within the social sciences, and by the early 1970s they were manifesting themselves in media studies, challenging the dominant perspective. Critical media research still exists, in various versions, though its proponents are still a minority, and the signifier of "critical" has less fixity these days, a point I will return to shortly. There were a number of shared elements among the original critical scholars, but four "schools" can be identified: critical political economy (the "critical" here signifies the general Marxian origins of this trajectory), the critique of ideology, public sphere theory, and elements from cultural studies. (Dahlberg explores the links between DT and the first three of these traditions in Chapter 2.)

In critical political economy of the media, the emphasis is often on the links between economics and the social, political, and cultural dimensions of modern life; pluralist or consensus models of society are generally rejected as inaccurate A recurring thematic is the tension between, on the one hand, the capitalist logic of media development and operations, and, on the other, concerns for the public interest and democracy. The critical political economy of the media does not anticipate the elimination of commercial imperatives or market forces, but rather seeks to promote an understanding of where and how regulatory initiatives can establish optimal balances between private interest and

the public good. The work of Robert McChesney (see, for example, McChesney 2008) and his colleagues in the US is a fine contemporary example.

The critique of ideology has its intellectual roots not only in Marx, but also in the structural Marxism of Althusser, as well as the more culturally oriented versions of the Frankfurt School's critical theory and Gramsci. Methodologies and epistemologies were at times in conflict between these traditions. Ideology has always been a slippery concept, and the earlier assumptions about false consciousness could not hold up to the scrutiny of increasingly sophisticated epistemologies. In media studies, the class-based version of ideology began to fade by the early 1980s, as Marxism ebbed as a guiding analytic framework.

Ideology as an analytic construct was given one final shot in the arm within media studies through its reformulation by John B. Thompson (1991), via Ricoeur, as a hermeneutic strategy for elucidating how communication serves to reproduce social relations of domination and subordination of all kinds, not just those based in class. Yet even this alternative gradually became replaced by versions of critical discourse analysis of media representations. Many currents within critical discourse analysis in fact continue in the spirit and goals of the critique of ideology, though without always using the term. Other strands, while insisting on the importance of the social contexts, do not always have much political clout in their rendering of the context.

The concept of the public sphere, which I addressed above and which is given an extensive treatment in Dahlberg's Chapter 2, began to make itself felt in the English-speaking world in the 1970s, taking off significantly with the translation of Habermas' key text (1962/1989). Media researchers began using the concept to pursue critical analyses of mass media, examining the factors that impede the public sphere. While the concept can still retain its critical edge, there is also a tendency for its usage to drift toward the liberal notion of the "marketplace of ideas" and similar metaphors, especially where the problems of journalism are discussed and researched. In such cases it becomes disconnected from its Frankfurt School origins.

Versions of both cultural Marxism and of structural Marxism – the latter making use of Freudian theory adapted via Lacan – became incorporated into the development of cultural studies. The critique of ideology began to blend with cultural theory, signaling a growing entwinement of the critical and culturalist schools. Cultural studies has grown into a heterogeneous, multidisciplinary field in its own right, with contributions from currents such as feminism, postmodernism, and post-colonialism.

Today studies of the media are only a small part of its vast concerns. As cultural studies expanded and went global, however, the critical character of its earlier years has not always been retained.

With the emergence of the Internet, and its various ancillary technologies such as mobile phones, these critical currents have in a sense become reinvigorated. There is some work on the political economy of the Net, with policy frames tending to dominate. The critique of ideology has not been resurrected per se, but there is plenty of work going on using variations of critical discourse analysis. Not least, theories of the public sphere have experienced a resurgence, even if the frame is often Habermasian deliberative democracy and its conceptual horizons. Yet we also see efforts applying culturalist perspectives on meaning, identity, and subjectivity to themes of citizenship and political participation, as I do in my own work. The overwhelming majority of this critical work is academic in character, only a small portion is explicitly political and action-oriented, though there is a constant struggle to attain relevance beyond university settings.

Interface, and the dual trajectory of critique

From this brief synopsis we can draw a few conclusions that can have a potential bearing on the interface between DT and CMP. Most fundamentally, there is a strong tradition of critical research within the academic studies of media that emphasizes politics. These have a somewhat heterogeneous past and retain this character today – much like the Left itself, I might add. Though strong, these critical voices are still a minority. In today's political climate (not least at the universities), CMP generally finds itself in a defensive position, yet is still very much alive. CMP lacks a clear, unifying theoretical political perspective, and there is at times uncertainty what being "critical" means in the face of prevailing circumstances. However, if we add what I mentioned earlier about the porous nature of the field's theoretical and methodological boundaries generally, we could say that a rather open, non-doctrinaire climate still prevails among critical media researchers; positivism may still be alive, but many choose to bypass it.

Further, the specific critical traditions of political economy and the public sphere are still very viable; the critique of ideology strand has morphed into a more diffuse approach where critical discourse analysis (along with some other methodologies) examines media representations, even if the analysis of context does not always mean explicit political confrontations with prevailing power arrangements. There are critical

currents still present within cultural studies that emphasize how meaning, subjectivity, and identity relate to issues of power. Moreover, these perspectives are increasingly being applied to the theme of citizenship and civic agency, contributing implicitly to a growing cross-pollination between the culturalist and public sphere traditions.

All this speaks for a potentially fertile ground for DT within CMP. This is further enhanced by the character of the new media landscape, where "media" involve less and less traditional "audiencing," with its one-way flows, and more possibilities for proactive measures, interaction, production, and intervention. There is a lot of "activity" on the Net, and not an insignificant amount of it is political, even if politics remains rather low in the hierarchy, compared to other uses of the Internet. At present, there are many interesting developments; not least the shift of significant progressive political activity away from traditional alternative media sites, which are being seen more and more as echo chambers, towards popular spaces such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. There is clearly a good deal of ambivalence about this (see Asakanius & Gustafsson, 2010), since using such spaces as a strategy risks both being drowned out by all the non-political material, as well as having to adopt commercial communication strategies.

Far from all of the political action on the Net is progressive by any means, yet the point is that there is an ever-growing use of media as forms of political practice. It should also be noted that, with the emergence of the Net, "media studies" went very multidisciplinary, now engaging researchers across most of the disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. If DT is a relatively solidified and coherent phenomenon, CMP is becoming all the more diffuse and heterogeneous. This suggests that making inroads in CMP will involve engagements on many different fronts; there is no one port of entry.

It is encouraging that there are still viable critical currents within media research. But what do we mean by "critical"? Or, moving from the adjective to the noun, what do we mean by "critique"? Volumes can be – and have been – written on this, and I do not intend to go very deeply into it here. However, we can at least identify a dual trajectory in the history of the concept, both of which are operative in DT and CMP; highlighting this can further promote their interface.

Briefly, there are two traditions of critique that have relevance for us. One derives from Kant, who argued for the importance of critically understanding how various factors condition what we know and our ways of knowing. This is epistemological reflection. Our knowledge and

experience of the world are never fully direct, but always mediated in a number of ways; the importance of critically reflecting on the grounds of our own knowing is the message in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Today we understand that our sense organs, languages, specific cultural frames of perception, social location, and so on all impact on our knowledge and subjectivity. The other tradition of critique winds its way from Hegel, through Marx, and all the subsequent forms of critical theories (such as feminism). Here is the focus on unnecessary restriction on human freedom; it is the normative critique of domination and oppression.

I would say – in a descriptive manner – that the Hegelian tradition of critique is obviously central to the project of DT, with its emphasis on power relations, even if DT per se does not mobilize the vocabulary of this tradition. I see Laclau and Mouffe's commitment to the critique of domination to be analytically broad – and hence they had to go beyond Marxian class analysis in order to develop a framework for dealing with the realities of domination in all its possible forms in contemporary society, while nonetheless retaining a classic Marxian commitment to the possibility of social change (see further discussion in the introduction). This sense of critique largely resonates within CMP as well.

However, I would suggest that DT also manifests a strong Kantian sense of critique – despite Laclau's explicit privileging of ontological concerns over Kant's preoccupation with epistemological ones. Its position of anti-essentialism, and its analytic vocabulary (of discourse, articulation, nodes, floating signifiers, partial fixity, and so on), together offer a strong argument about how we come to know the world, and the limits to this knowing. In fact, I would suggest that this perspective connects rather well with several of the anti-positivist currents that inform CMP. Thus, we can see DT as an effort that seeks to renew the critical tradition in this dual manner.

It could be argued that critique should begin at home, that is to say, that any self-conscious system of thought has an obligation to reflect critically, in a Kantian manner, on the grounds of its own knowing, its premises and value horizons. For DT this would mean in particular the reflexive application of its central building block, its ontology of radical contingency, against its own project: what are the circumstances and factors that make DT possible, and what are the limits of its knowledge of the world? However, DT has, up to this time, largely avoided reflecting on its own contingency and contestability, and Dahlberg in Chapter 2 sees this as an absence within the DT corpus. However, an implicit "authoritarianism" is avoided by Laclau's general assertion that

theory is never absolute, and must continually modify itself in the face of historical developments.

Ideology: By another name?

One might speculate that the reason Laclau avoids such critical self-reflection is that, consistent with his philosophy, there is no privileged position outside of discourses from which to examine one's own discourse. This impasse may also hold a clue as to why there is in his (and Mouffe's work), a relative de-emphasizing of the theme of ideology: since the concept is traditionally predicated on a distinction between the true and the false, a view committed to the primacy of the radical contingency of all knowing would likely avoid going down that road.

We find some discussion of ideology later in Laclau's work, especially in two articles (Laclau 1997, 2006). He quickly dispatches the notion of ideology as "false consciousness," pointing to the traditional problem that this model implies a privileged knower and some body of knowledge that embodies "the truth." His view is that prevailing discourses may or may not have anything to do with some abstract truth, but the point is that their position is always contingent and anchored in the political, and in power relations. The next step, quite logically, is that there is no position outside of some kind of ideology – and the illusion that such a position actually exists in fact manifests ideological thinking of the deepest kind. Yet he does hold on to concepts like misrecognition and distortion, signaling that there are still important distinctions to be made.

In short, there is an ambivalence here. In his excellent review of the notion of ideology in Laclau's later work, Beverungen (2006) charts a path that could lead to unearthing within Laclau – and perhaps in spite of him – an approach for "resurrecting" the concept of ideology. This goes via among other things a discussion of Laclau's use of Derrida's notion of "undecideability." Beverungen suggests that a lot of work remains in this regard, and I am most inclined to believe him. Dahlberg in Chapter 2, when thinking of the possibility of ideology critique in DT, quotes Laclau as saying that ideology involves the "critique of the naturalization of meaning" and of the "essentialization of the social," of the "non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any ultimate suture" (Laclau, 1990, p. 92). But beyond such overarching delineation of the attributes of ideology in Laclau's work, it becomes tough going to extract some useful approach for any more detailed critique of ideology.

And yet there is something inescapable about the concerns that ideology traditionally addresses. Stuart Hall, a name familiar to many within CMP, and a close reader of Laclau's work, writes:

> The *problem* of ideology is to give an account, within a materialist theory, of how social ideas arise . . . By ideology I mean the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works. (Hall, 1996, p. 26)

Hall argues here that the media are key sites for the contestation of meaning or the "struggle in discourse," "the politics of signification." The notion of ideology in fact combines both traditions of critique: it has to do with what and how we know, and it is also concerned with social relations of domination/subordination. That the term itself has been relegated to the margins has in part to do with the inadequacies of Marxism as an analytic tool, as well as the prevalence of a variety of intellectual positions that serve to undermine simple distinctions between the true and the false. Yet the essential logic that "social ideas" have social origins and social consequences remains, as testified by the continuity of this angle of vision via versions of critical discourse analysis. If DT and CMP are to have a constructive interface, the two camps need to come to terms on the idea of ideology, and develop the initial engagement with Laclau's work by Hall and others. Moreover, as we shall see in the next section, some work in CMP inspired by DT still manage to follow this critical tradition, even if using a different terminology.

The current initiatives

Adaptive appropriation

In their explicit probe of DT's utility for media research, Carpentier and De Cleen (2007) conclude that their case study shows that DT "has provided ample theoretical and methodological support for a Media Studies oriented analysis, and it has allowed a different – but equally relevant – type of analysis of media content and practices than could have been performed by reverting to CDA [i.e., critical discourse analysis]" (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007, p. 286). What emerges in the course of their analysis of a television discussion program is that the notion of "participation," which was much lauded in the course of the program,

is at bottom an "empty signifier": it has no real innate meaning. Their analysis traces how the lack of fixity of this signifier gradually becomes transformed, and becomes congealed, via a series of interactions based on specific subject positions, and conveys meaning about the importance of ordinary people. Using further analytic categories from DT, such as antagonistic identity, nodal points, articulation, contingency, and counter-hegemony, the authors are able to trace the processes by which this term is socially constructed in this media context, relating it to power relations in society, and underscoring the political character of seemingly trivial television culture.

They claim that they could not have worked this way with the more familiar critical discourse analysis. This is probably true, though my guess is that they could have attained at least some somewhat similar conclusions using some selection of methodological tools from the extensive storehouse available in linguistic and cultural analysis, combined with a sensitive political antenna. The point as I see it, however, is that DT offered them a focused perspective and conceptual vocabulary that promotes this particular angle of vision – an analytic lens, as it were. It also helps reduce the hodgepodge of methodological eclecticism that often accompanies these kinds of ventures: DT provided much of the package. At the same time, they combined the use of DT with other ingredients, including qualitative and quantitative content analysis techniques, and elements of other discourse analysis approaches, as well as components from journalism theory and audience theory.

We can derive a number of conclusions from this. The first is the obvious analytical inspiration that DT provides. Secondly, given DT's silence in matters of practical methodology, the authors freely combined conceptual DT elements with familiar data analysis techniques from other traditions; while DT presents itself as a rather rigorous system of thought, the approach here is exploratory rather than doctrinaire. Thirdly, this framework led them to specify a particular motif, a central sign, as residing at the core of the discourses they were analysing, in this case "participation." This arose from the material itself, and was not predetermined by DT. And finally, the rather "heavy" philosophical/ontological wing of DT was apparently seen as optional, and did not figure much in the actual analysis of the material.

If we turn to the preceding chapters in this volume, we can see some similar patterns. It is obvious that they all take their point of departure in some intellectual inspiration derived from DT; this is hardly surprising. From there, the authors vary greatly in what they focus on and what elements they see as central to the material they are examining.

Some put the emphasis on CMP and extract useful contributions from DT; for others, the situation is reversed, with the development of DT being of prime concern. Yet, regardless of their angle of entry, all the chapters explore the grey area between DT and CMP.

Inspiration and exploration

Wei-Yuan Chang and Jason Glynos, in Chapter 5, have fantasy and enjoyment in their sights, as they examine the popular press, mobilizing the psychoanalytic dimension of DT. They too "follow the signifier," in this case the affective dimensions of this popular media genre. The result is a reading of the popular tabloid press that illuminates how emotion is mobilized, and its political implications. Making use of currents within a psychoanalytically inflected cultural studies research on politics and popular culture, this chapter shares much common ground with that tradition. And, interestingly enough, it deals explicitly with ideology – thus manifesting a non-orthodox rendering of DT. In a more abstract discussion, Jeremy Gilbert, in Chapter 4, also takes hold of the sign of affect, underscoring its centrality for democracy. Here too the discussion mobilizes a wide variety of sources and intellectual currents to contribute to the improvement of DT, again staying clear of dogmatism.

In Chapter 9, Jon Simons begins from DT, rather than CMP, and argues that DT ignores media theory to its detriment. Again, we see the specification of a particular, key signifier, in this case "the people," and its representation. As Simons puts it, "Laclau's political theory of the constitution of the political subjectivity of the people is sorely in need of media theory in its accounts of the discursive construction of the people. . . . Laclau's linguistic formalism overwhelms and precludes theorization of a contextual, historical appreciation of political contingency." This engagement with DT's theoretically deficient horizons sees the incorporation of insights from CMP as a way forward. Yet, it should be noted that the engagement here is at the level of methodological questions in regard to DT's capacity to deliver relevant political analyses (in particular, the theme of populism); it is not interrogating ontological issues.

Oliver Marchart in Chapter 3 illuminates the practices of what he calls mediality (that is, media-making) among alternative groups as an important element in shaping their political subjectivity. He also insists on the a priori political quality of all mediality: since media representations always rest on human decisions about what to portray and how it is to be angled, "mediality is inexorably embedded in the notion of the political." While the chapter is rather densely argued, it applies a

cornerstone of DT to contemporary concerns within CMP in a robust manner that serves to connect the two more strongly.

Sean Phelan offers a fruitful theoretical exploration in Chapter 6, identifying Bourdieu's field theory as an important supplement to what he perceives to be inadequacies in DT. In specifying the similarities and differences between them, Phelan's probing of the commonalities between Laclau's concept of discourse and, in particular, Bourdieu's category of habitus will certainly help many interested readers gain a better grasp of DT. It should also serve in an inspiring way to open up DT to broader lines of inquiry, not just from CMP, and also help counteract its somewhat hermetic character.

In Chapter 7, Jack Zeljko Bratich provides a sustained engagement with the notion of discourse in the work of Laclau and Mouffe, tracing the evolution of the concept through various phases of debates both within DT and between it and voices from outside of it. Unsurprisingly, the exposition here is somewhat abstract. Yet, even if media themes hover in the margins of this discussion, he reminds us in several ways of an important point for CMP: DT's "residual power resides in how it underscores the contingency and constructedness of any position or action." This idea should by now not be understood as an incantation, but rather as an insightful and evocative postulate that CMP researchers can use to approach phenomena with fresh eyes that look to imaginative alternatives to present circumstances.

New social movements and their online activities have played an important role over the past decade or so in maintaining some degree of political optimism in many corners. But the technology itself raises issues about the character of politics and political activity. Natalie Fenton, in Chapter 8, reminds us that in the fluid world of the Net, which blends social contacts, culture, politics, entertainment, commerce, and so forth, locating the political, and finding one's identity as a citizen can become slippery. She cites Bauman's notion of "liquid citizens," pointing to the difficulties of formulating political practice in the digital world, which often seems to lack a solid social anchoring and can even foster de-democratization. With the fluid character of many social movements, she warns that it is easy to confuse the atomized experiences of political activism with genuine political input. Fenton creatively mobilizes insights from DT to address this issue: "Put simply, we need a deep and radical contextualization of our online mediations to reach a critical understanding of media changes and political ontology in the new mediascape . . . "

From different starting points and with different emphases, these chapters constitute a major step forward in exploring the cross-fertilization

of DT and CMP. There are also other efforts, including the work of Nico Carpentier and his colleagues, as mentioned earlier. Furthermore, Yiannis Mylonas (2009; forthcoming) makes adept use of DT to analyse documentary representations of the War on Terror in the wake of 9/11, and Julie Uldam (2010) examines the campaigns in popular online spaces of two London-based social movement organizatons within the Global Justice Movement. Both combine DT with other methodologies in an effective manner.

The philosophy–theory–methodology nexus

The triad of discourse theory

So, where does this leave DT and CMP in relation to each other? If we return to the presentation of DT in the Introduction, and the first sections of this chapter, we are reminded of its character as a somewhat daunting critical project that, on the one hand, has not engaged sufficiently with media politics for its own good, and, almost paradoxically, at the same time clearly has something important to specifically offer CMP – as well as the renewal of the post-Marxist critical project more generally. Based on a framework first developed by Smith (1999), Carpentier and De Cleen (2007) in their explicit attempt to probe DT's utility for media studies, suggest how DT can be read on three different levels. These levels, or dimensions, suggest that DT basically comprises a triad:

Social ontology: this can be treated as the philosophical foundation of DT in the strict sense. Perhaps this is the biggest challenge to its broader diffusion; it is a conceptually dense set of propositions. Its most fundamental tenet is the inseparability of language and materiality – and, of course, the consequences of this position. Interestingly enough, most of the more applied chapters in this book, as well as the dissertation by Uldam (2010), do not spend much energy on this point, but tend rather simply to highlight it in ways that are familiar to most researchers who insist, for example, on the importance of the context of any text.

Political identity theory: here we find the more useful and accessible set of concepts that can be mobilized, operationalized, and applied empirically. This dimension is concerned with the flow and ebb of politics, via the dynamics of discourses: political antagonisms and agonisms; the

articulation and the construction of nodal points of fixed meanings; hegemony as the articulation of political identities through the struggle over meaning in relation to ongoing antagonisms (fixity vs dislocation); the logics of equivalence and differences in the development and maintenance of political alliances. Political conflicts involve establishing boundaries between "us" and "them," giving rise to identities that are specific and contingent to the circumstances. Identities, as such, have no essence, but are constantly shaped and reshaped in the ongoing conflicts of political life.

Radical democracy theory: this dimension has been developed more by Mouffe in her own writings. While building firmly on the first two dimensions of DT and its key ideas about meaning, identity, contingency, and political contestation, this dimension sets a course that challenges many elements of traditional liberal theory as well as Habermasian notions of deliberative democracy. In its commitment to a democratic system and its procedures, radical democracy theory offers an alternative way of looking at, for example, citizenship, participation, and political discussion. Mouffe's writings have had a bit more impact in media studies than Laclau's (see the interview in Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006) and offer a way of looking at democracy that lauds it as the best and most civilized way for dealing with societal conflict. At same time, this view admonishes us to understand and accept that conflict and the struggles for hegemony are inseparable from social life – the political can arise anywhere – and that there is no harmonious, non-conflictual future waiting for us.

This triad is useful not just as a pedagogic device to aid in grasping a rather conceptually challenging body of thought, but also as a clue to a certain division of labor that can be significant for CMP. Thus, the first dimension comprises philosophical investigation and ongoing conceptual clarification; this is what lies at the intellectual core of DT. To be productively active within this dimension requires a philosophical temperament and a considerable investment of intellectual energy to grasp the logic and the specialized vocabulary. Most CMP researchers will not be entering this terrain. However, not least with the aid of secondary literature such as the Introduction to this volume, the basic premises of DT are now within reach of those who have at least some curiosity about it.

If I jump to the third dimension, we find ourselves in the domain of normative political theory. The links between media and democratic

theory have long been explored, including theories of citizenship. A number of media researchers, myself included, have made use specifically of Mouffe's writings to reflect on the media's role in regard to enhancing or inhibiting democracy generally, and citizenship more specifically. Radical democracy has certain affinities with republican versions of citizenship, and more critical encounters can emerge with liberalism and communitarianism; the debates and issues are at least familiar in certain circles among media researchers. Radical democracy can thus be seen as a theoretical horizon that is highly relevant and easily applicable to CMP.

It is in the second dimension where I see that the encounter between the two sets of scholars could be most fruitfully developed. Here we have a conceptual scheme, an analytic vocabulary that can be appropriated for studying empirical phenomena, looking at concrete dynamics within CMP, at the media in their various forms, at media practices, at antagonisms, and the formation of political identities. Here CMP can also help DT fill in its own gaps, by, for instance, providing more detailed knowledge about how mediated politics operate in relation to populism and neoliberalism, specifying concretely how hegemony operates today, and illuminating counter-hegemonic practices and identities.

A useful toolkit

The editors, in their Introduction, write about the potential of DT for CMP, stating that ". . . the point is to focus critical attention on the blind spots and occlusions within existing social and media practices, so that the possibilities of a different kind of social or media order – in effect, a different regime of social objectivity – might be made visible." Some scholars working in CMP have begun to make use of the rich conceptual apparatus of DT's political identity theory as well as radical democracy theory; we have seen that they can be appropriated and operationalized for empirical analysis. Ultimately we will just have to see if the overall stance of DT, its critical sensibilities, and especially its analytic categories, will continue to be useful for CMP in this way; it would be most welcome. It is precisely as a useful toolkit that I see the best hope for the DT–CMP interface.

Media researchers tend not to be rigorous philosophers, but they are often what we might call bricolage theorists. They appropriate a bit here and there, mostly just using small pieces of theoretical traditions, only occasionally importing larger traditions more or less intact. They aim for micro- or middle-range theoretical constructs, usually avoiding the more ambitious totalizing variants. Above all else, they tend to be empirical

researchers, which means they generally like to have some sort of theoretical platform, but above all a solid methodological grounding. In this regard the engagement with DT can be understood as a nexus, or perhaps a progression, that begins with philosophy, moves toward theory (political identity and radical democracy) and ultimately – at best, that is – lands with methodology.

It is unlikely that DT will become a major tradition on the intellectual map of CMP, but, in regard to their mutual fertilization, it is possible that we will see a blooming period in the years ahead. Like any intellectual movement, this needs to proceed on several fronts: the development of core intellectual components (fine-tuning, revising, updating the mutual intellectual terrain); continued application, in other words, putting it to use in various contexts, demonstrating its utility; pedagogy and publicity, that is, spreading the key ideas to circles where it is less or unfamiliar, clarifying it, putting it on people's mental maps. DT can be seen in part as a summary, synthesis and reinvigoration of important twentieth-century critical strands of thought. It invites us to be alert to questions of power and to see the political in all social phenomena, while taking into account the multiple dimensions of historical contexts and experiences. It has issues and problems, some of which have come out in the chapters here, others are addressed more within its own circles. Yet it remains inspiring. We can hope that its promotion of the idea of alliance-building will help facilitate the links between DT and CMP.

Note

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Index