Introduction

A core concern in the study of the interface between language and politics is the issue of how ideological power is attained and maintained through certain types of language use, resulting in a distinct kind of symbolic structuring of the socio-political space. This issue is at the heart of Ernesto Laclau’s work on discourse and hegemony. Here, for a start, hegemony can be taken to signify the kind of political power constituted not through brute repression or domination, nor through the inertia of tradition or convention, but by way of formulating a political or ideological programme for society with which people can actively identify and invest in emotionally.

What has become known as ‘discourse theory’ was first formulated in the book *Hegemony and socialist strategy* (1985 [2001]) by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In it, they attempted to formulate a ‘post-Marxist’ theory of the formation of hegemonic struggles by drawing on post-structuralism. In describing their approach as post-Marxist, they wished to convey that, while their notion of hegemony rested on a rejection of central tenets in classical Marxist thought, it was, nonetheless, still inspired by, and formulated in and through, the conceptual universe of Marxist theory (Laclau & Mouffe 1985 [2001], p. 4). In particular, Antonio Gramsci and his theory of hegemony is a source of inspiration, because Gramsci’s idea of hegemony as the ‘organization of consent’ seeks to escape the economic determinism of ‘vulgar Marxism’ and to afford the ideological superstructure relative autonomy. But according to Laclau and Mouffe, Gramsci still considers the central role of the working class to be determined by economic location, and thus, ultimately, he does not escape the economic essentialism inherent in Marxism (Barrett 1994). Hence the notion of hegemony in *Hegemony and socialist strategy* is developed through a detailed discussion of Marxist theorising, while clearly superseding this in a fuller engagement with an insistence on contingency and the anti-foundationalism present in various strands of post-structuralist thought.

Since the publication of *Hegemony and socialist strategy*, however, the theory has been substantially broadened and, in some cases, altered by Ernesto Laclau, primarily in such works as *New reflections on the revolution of our time* (1990), *Emancipation(s)* (1996) and,
more recently, _On populist reason_ (2005). Although his 1985 work with Chantal Mouffe remains the best-known and most widely cited of these, it does, nonetheless, not do justice to either Laclau or discourse theory if considering an introduction such as this without taking later developments on board. But what follows will not take the form of a ‘history’ of discourse theory, focusing closely on the various reformulations and the context and reasons for their introduction. Rather, the aim here is to relay to the reader, not necessarily already familiar with discourse theory, its fundamental arguments, assumptions and potential applications. Although Chantal Mouffe has also developed her own strand of discourse theory, here, I will focus primarily on Laclau’s work.

Despite various developments and changes, Laclau’s discourse theory does, nevertheless, remain constant in its concern to explain and understand the deeper dynamics of political dominance and conflict in society. It differs therefore from a more Foucauldian ambition to explore extensive knowledge systems (cf. Foucault 1972) and from the preoccupation central to Critical Discourse Analysis to understand the finer rhetorical strategies and manoeuvres embedded in media and political texts (cf. Reisigl & Wodak 2001; Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl & Liebhart 1999). Furthermore, discourse theory differs from these approaches in that it rejects the former’s reliance on the ‘extra-discursive’ and is fundamentally at odds with the often Habermasian foundations of the latter (Forchtner 2011).

As has been pointed out by David Howarth (2000, p. 117; 2004, p. 266), Laclau’s interests are primarily of an ontological nature, seeking to question the very foundations on which any construction and investigation of society, politics and power must ultimately rest, and thus to challenge and criticise other ontologies, primarily of an essentialist or objectivist bent. The ontic level of exploring ‘the nature of specific types of object, practice, institutions or even concrete discourses’ (Howarth 2004, p. 266) receives much less attention in Laclau’s work (see also Mouffe 2005, pp. 8–9). This means that, as regards the application of discourse theory to a concrete empirical material or case – not to mention the development of suitable ‘methods’ – this is something that Laclau tends to leave to others. Indeed, as Jacob Torfing points out, the critical reflection on the choice of suitable methods in concrete analysis is thus made the responsibility of anyone employing discourse theory, even if its founder shows very little interest in such issues (Torfing 2005, p. 25).

Thus, even if I include some explanatory analytical examples in what follows, I will nevertheless primarily seek to explain the major theoretical building blocks of Laclau’s theory, starting with his understanding of ‘Discourse’ as being equally constituted by the dynamics of articulation and dislocation, and from there, moving on to the more overtly political concepts of hegemony, empty signifiers and their relationship to the development of ideological affect or political passion.

**Discourse, articulation and dislocation**

The starting point for Laclau and Mouffe is Ferdinand de Saussure’s idea of language as a system of signs whose meaning is determined solely by their relation to each other (Howarth 2000, pp. 18–23). On the basis of this understanding of meaning as a strictly relational phenomenon, Laclau and Mouffe first define the concept of articulation as ‘any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice’ (Laclau & Mouffe 1985 [2001], p. 105), and from this a first notion of discourse as simply ‘the structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice’ (Laclau & Mouffe 1985 [2001], p. 105). Discourse should, at its most basic, be perceived as ‘any complex of elements in which relations play the constitutive role’ (Laclau 2005, p. 68, see
also Laclau & Mouffe 1985 [2001], pp. 106–110). As this might indicate, Laclau furthermore emphasises that his notion of discourse is one of ‘a meaningful totality which transcends the distinction between the linguistic and the extra-linguistic’ (Laclau 1993, p. 435). Discourse is not simply ‘text and talk’, but also entails anything meaningful, including individuals, objects, actions and practices. Discourse in this sense is very much material, or rather it includes the material alongside the linguistic insofar as it is meaningful (Laclau & Mouffe 1987, pp. 82–84).

This means that Laclau and Mouffe manifestly reject the legitimacy of a distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices – a distinction that is still present in the work of Foucault (Laclau & Mouffe 1985 [2001], pp. 107–108). Discourses are not determined or secured by some non-discursive context or ground, because, insofar as this ground or context is meaningful, it too is discursively structured. This means that Laclau and Mouffe reject any Marxist notion of determination in the last instance by the economy, and also any idea of a subject external to, and able to, autonomously master discourse. Rather, they accept Foucault’s notion of subject positions in order to emphasise that the position of the speaking individual too is constructed in and through discourse. This in no way entails a denial of a world external to thought, only an insistence that the world (‘reality’), insofar as it is meaningful, is discursively structured. In a classical example, they argue that:

An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independent of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of ‘natural phenomena’ or ‘expressions of the wrath of God’, depends on the structuring of a discursive field.

(Laclau & Mouffe 1985 [2001], p. 108)

Laclau and Mouffe therefore speak of elements which, when incorporated in a discursive structure and thus given meaning, become moments (Laclau & Mouffe 1985 [2001], p. 106).

But it is not just that there is nothing extra-discursive which can ground or stabilise the discursive order, it is also that such a differential system would be unable to stabilise itself. Crucial to Laclau’s thinking is the (post-structuralist) notion that no differential discursive structure can ever attain full closure. It cannot constitute itself as a full and stable totality in the sense that Saussure imagined the language-system to be. Laclau argues that, for such a differential system to constitute itself as a ‘finished’ totality, it would need to be able to constitute its clearly defined limits, and this would mean that the system as such would itself need to be constituted against an ‘outside’ beyond these limits. But the consequence of this would be that, in relation to the system’s limits and beyond, the internal differences (of which it consists) would be subverted; they would become equated qua their common differentiation from the ‘constitutive’ outside. What emerges then is the paradox that such systemic limits are both the condition of possibility for a differential system and its conditions of impossibility. The limits and the outside make the system possible, but they simultaneously subvert the internal relations of difference that define it. A fundamental split and ambivalence thus enters every moment of the system as they become undecidably suspended between their (internal) differential identities, and their identity as similar moments qua their being part of the same system vis-à-vis its outside (Laclau & Mouffe 1985 [2001], pp. 110–112, Laclau 1996a, pp. 37–38).

In a more direct sense, this means that whatever a discursive order excludes returns to haunt it. The excluded elements remain as a destabilising factor always preventing ‘full
The discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau

closure’. This destabilising ‘outside’ of excluded or alternative meanings, undermining a given discursive order, is what Laclau and Mouffe call the ‘field of discursivity’, a potential ‘surplus of meaning’ consisting of elements that cannot be fixed as moments in the discursive structure. Therefore, any discursive order remains, fundamentally, only one contingent configuration or construction and never becomes able to domesticate the entirety of the field of discursivity, or shut down what, as such, remains a fundamental ‘openness’ of the social (Laclau & Mouffe 1985 [2001], pp. 110–114). An example might be the notion of an essential link between the people, territory and culture found in nationalism. Then, the point that Laclau and Mouffe are making would be that, no matter how dominant such a nationalist discourse becomes, it is still confronted by what it cannot integrate, by the elements in the social space that do not fit its harmonious image of an ideal national reality. Historically, these excluded – and (for nationalists) haunting – elements have often taken the form of transnational or migrant minorities which, as such, can be said to challenge (or ‘dislocate’) the dominant discourse, not simply because they do not ‘fit’, but because this very ‘misfitting’ reveals that the version of reality portrayed in ‘nationalist’ discourse is a construction; it is only one possible image of reality among others.

This does not of course amount to an argument that meaning, as such, is impossible. As Laclau and Mouffe note, a world without any fixation of meaning would be a world of the psychotic (Laclau and Mouffe 1985 [2001], p. 112). But fundamental to their thinking is an insistence that discourses are only ever a partial fixation of meaning. Indeed, without such insistence, the very concept of articulation would be redundant; social life would take the form of an endless re-enactment of structurally prescribed practices and statements, and we would simply have moved determinism from the extra-discursive to the discursive realm (cf. Laclau 1997, p. 299).

The partial fixity nevertheless achieved relies on what Laclau and Mouffe call nodal points. These are (socially) privileged signifiers around which other meanings can stabilise. Indeed, the idea of nodal points borrows heavily from the Lacanian idea of a discursive point de caption, a notion that trades on the metaphor of a ‘quilting button’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985 [2001], p. 112). The basic idea is that, even if the discursive structure never attains its own full stability and ‘closure’, its relative coherence is still secured by it being ‘tied down’ around certain such nodal points. In concrete terms, a nodal point might be a central concept, in relation to which, other ideas in the same discourse or ideology are defined or restricted, as for example might be said to be the case for ‘Volk’ in National Socialism, which heavily influenced the meaning of signifiers from ‘Art’ to ‘foreign policy’. However, it is crucial to note that nodal points can also take other linguistic forms; they may take the form of an especially evocative metaphor, a name, or even an image. Thus, in a fuller definition of articulation, Laclau and Mouffe can state that:

The practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the particular character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity.

(Laclau and Mouffe 1985 [2001]:113)

Although the inherent contingency and partial instability of any discursive order is, as such, fundamental to the theory, Laclau and Mouffe are of course aware that the social sphere is, most of the time, experienced as a relatively stable conglomerate of ‘taken for granted’ practices, relationships and identities. They thus introduce the notion of sedimentation in
order to capture the point that even if, in the last instance, contingency is ineliminable, certain meanings can settle over time and come to appear as ‘natural and unalterable’ (Laclau 1990, pp. 34–35). Indeed, what they term ‘the social’ designates those social practices that have become sedimented, whereas ‘the political’ is the realm of conflict and contestation, of breaking and making new and old meanings. The insistence on a fundamental contingency would then mean that, even if it is, at times, experienced as though society is characterised by great stability, moments of the social could always, in the right circumstances, become re-politicised and thus again enter the realm of the political (Laclau 1990, pp. 34–36). Such circumstances are what Laclau later comes to designate as ‘dislocation’ (Laclau 1990, pp. 39-43). Dislocation refers to ‘the process by which the contingency of discursive structures is made visible’ (Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000, p. 3), meaning the impact of developments or events that destabilises the discursive structure, which literally throws it ‘out of joint’. Prominent examples of such processes are revolutions, natural disasters or wars, but more extensive phenomena, such as the impact of globalisation on the nation-state, or the emergence of mass migration, may also be thought of as dislocatory processes. Even a political scandal or a spectacular election defeat, while on a smaller scale, might be thought of as carrying dislocating potential. The concept of dislocation is associated with developments or events that bring about a feeling of insecurity, change and possibility, and thus with situations where hitherto-accepted structural conditions, or limitations, are experienced as loosening or falling away. This is central to discourse theory because its core arguments and ideas aim precisely at understanding the political processes released in such turbulent times of change.

It is at times of dislocation that the (increasingly destabilised) discursive structures leave most room for subjects to formulate new political projects, new power relationships and ultimately, new forms of societal discursive order. In order to capture this, Laclau argues that beyond the structural dimension of the subject – its subject-position – we must also consider a more manifest and autonomous form of political subjectivity (Laclau & Zac 1994; Laclau 1996a, pp. 47–65; Laclau 1990, pp. 60–67). This notion of political subjectivity would then capture the dimension of radical agency in the subject, its ability (in times of dislocation) to do more than merely reproduce the structural conditions of its subject-position. Indeed, as ‘dislocation is the source of freedom’ (Laclau 1990, p. 60), Laclau describes the subject as ‘nothing but this distance between the undecidable structure and the decision’ (Laclau 1990, p. 30). The subject is never a transcendental one in total command of its discourses, but neither is it simply a structural product – a mere position in the structure. This is precisely because the structure is constitutively ‘damaged’ or incomplete. There is, in other words, true political subjectivity only because the structure does not manage to (fully) produce the subject, and thus cannot ultimately fully determine its decisions (cf. Laclau 1996b). At times of dislocation, when the world seems literally to be ‘thrown out of joint’ a space opens up in which political subjects can remake the structural conditions of their world, sometimes to a radical extent.

It is, however, crucial that this is not misunderstood as meaning that the subject thrives on the kind of insecurity and instability characterising periods of radical dislocation. Rather, Laclau continually emphasizes that, even if a fully stable discursive order of society is never achieved, it is, nonetheless, what is continually being attempted and sought after. The paradox here is then that, even if such totalising closure is impossible, it is nonetheless necessary, because without the endeavours to establish a fully coherent order there would be no meaning or identity at all (Laclau 2005, p. 70). Put somewhat more substantially, the fundamental idea is that what Laclau calls the ‘fullness of society’ (i.e. a society in which
The discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau

everything makes sense and total harmony rules) is constitutively unachievable, but it does nonetheless remain necessary to maintain such an idea of full closure as something akin to a communal ideal or common utopian horizon. Otherwise, the entire fabric of society would dissolve into its contingent elements; the illusion of a socially cohesive community guided by certain rules of behaviour, hierarchies of power and practices of exchange, would be revealed as a mere construction and would cease to exercise any regulatory influence.

As such, dislocation might be a moment of freedom, but it is a freedom that the subject employs to fight dislocation, to articulate new discursive structures, to establish new societal orders that, themselves, will never be complete and therefore require their own utopian horizons to achieve a partial stability. Dislocation is, as such and at once, a moment of emancipation and of trauma; it opens a space for the subject to act beyond the confines of established subject positions, but in so doing, it literally puts the subject in an ‘identity crisis’, in dire need of identifying in new ways, and with new political projects (Laclau 1990, p. 39; Howarth & Stavrakakis 2000, pp. 12–14).

An example that might serve to pull these various theoretical strands together is to consider the dislocatory impact of globalisation on the national welfare state and the rise of the so-called populist radical-right parties. Whereas the existence of the European welfare states and their relatively culturally homogenous societies did, in the post-war decades, increasingly come to be taken for granted – that is, they did to some extent become a de-politicised socially sedimented expectation of citizens – the impact of a globalising economy and other trans-border flows have served to re-politicise the cultural form and political futures of European states and societies. As such, the weakening of the welfare state has, in some ways, opened up the political field to new kinds of political projects, for example, the reformulated ethno-nationalism of the European populist radical right. The dislocation from globalisation has, as it were, introduced increased freedom for subjects in relation to more traditional (political) subject positions, such as ‘socialist’, ‘liberal’, and so on, and allowed for a fuller ‘political subjectivity’, through which such genuinely new political formations, ideas and projects can be formulated. In other ways, however, the attractive promise of these new ethno-nationalist political projects is precisely to reduce or even eliminate the felt dislocation from which they sprang, to reconstitute national sovereignty, bring the economy under domestic control, secure the borders and reinvigorate national culture. It is the process through which different groups or identities are, in times of dislocation, joined together in such new and forceful common political projects, that Laclau seeks to understand through his concept of hegemony.

Hegemony, empty signifiers and affect

In order to understand the theory of hegemony offered by Laclau (and Mouffe) it is necessary to move from their general understanding of the discursive construction of meaning to a more specific one of the constitution and dynamics of a political space and of the groups and forces operating therein. Already, in Hegemony and socialist strategy, Laclau and Mouffe offer the idea that political spaces are at the most abstract level constituted by two, in fact opposite, articulatory logics. What this means is that the relations forged by articulation can in general be viewed as expressions or combinations of a logic of difference and/or a logic of equivalence. The logic of difference is that fundamental rule of the Saussurean idea of language that operates as a differential system; it is a logic that secures the identity of a specific element (which can be a demand, a group, a voter, etc.) by differentiating it from other elements; it is a logic that produces particularity by way of distinction. The logic of
equivalence, in contrast, forges relations between elements by emphasising their similarity, by grouping, categorising or linking them together on the basis of something held in common. As such, it is a logic that tends towards the universal, in that it actually weakens distinctions between elements, which thereby enter into what Laclau and Mouffe call a ‘chain of equivalences’ (Laclau & Mouffe 1985 [2001], pp. 127–134; Butler, Laclau & Žižek 2000, pp. 302–304; Laclau 2005, pp. 77–78). Laclau considers these two kinds of dynamics to be fundamental and argues that even if he uses the terms logic of difference/equivalence specifically about the form these dynamics take in a political space, the same duality is present in linguistics as the distinction between the syntagmatic (combination/difference) and the paradigmatic (similarity/substitution) poles of language, and in rhetoric as the difference between metonymy and metaphor (Laclau 1988, p. 256). As should be clear from such parallels, these two logics are not simply to be understood as embodying a dichotomy between one that produces (political) meaning and one that undermines it. Rather, the meaning of a political space (its nodal points) is constituted by the tenuous compromise between the two dynamics, and the total domination of either is equally untenable. If the logic of difference ruled supreme, then no wider groups, political programmes or alliances between different interests could emerge; the political space would be completely fragmented and atomistic. But if the logic of equivalence were to rise to total dominance, there would only be sameness and no possibility of differentiation. In such a case, meaning – the foundation of which is still difference – would itself evaporate (Butler, Laclau & Žižek 2000, pp. 304–307, Torfing 1999, pp. 96–99).

The fundamental dynamics of a political space is as such conceived as a game of both differences and equivalences that proceed from the various attempts at linking and contrasting different groups, ideas and interests in wider alliances and conflicts. And this dynamic is played out as different political forces, actors or groups seek to link various so-called ‘floating signifiers’ into certain ‘chains of equivalences’, or at least to loosen them from the chains of opponents. A floating signifier is an element that has not (yet) received a definite meaning, either because a process of dislocation has detached it from its traditional sedimented position, or because various political forces seek to ascribe it meaning in radically different ways (Laclau & Mouffe 1985 [2001], p. 113; Andersen 2003, pp. 53–54). In essence, the cut and thrust of politics can be understood as ‘a double operation of breaking and extending chains of equivalence’ (Butler, Laclau & Laddaga 1997, p. 8), by way of rearticulating the floating signifiers of a given situation or period.

As such, the partial fixing of political meaning requires and retains both these logics. If we take the example of the nodal point of communism quilting the elements of democracy, freedom, the state, and so on, then, as Jacob Torfing puts it, what actually happens is that ‘a variety of signifiers are floating within the field of discursivity as their traditional meaning has been lost; suddenly some master signifier [the nodal point] intervenes and retroactively constitutes their identity by fixing the floating signifiers within a paradigmatic chain of equivalence’ (Torfing 1999, p. 99). The signifiers ‘quilted’ by the nodal point are clearly not simply synonymous, they retain some of their individual meaning. Equivalence is not identity and the individual links never become completely equivalent to the extent that all distinction between them is subverted. But in being collectively linked to communism, a certain equivalence is constructed between the linked concepts (democracy, freedom, the state) qua their (new) status as various elements of communism. A crucial point here is, however, that the construction of equivalence must rely on common external differentiation. Given that there is nothing essentially communist in these signifiers, their linking in the equivalential chain of communism proceeds from the positing of a ‘common outside’, that
is, of something that they are collectively differentiated from (e.g. the false democracy, exploitation and bourgeois state of capitalism). Here we are of course simply returning to the same dilemma, one which was formulated around the undecidability of a differential system and its limits. The unstable compromise between the two logics thus invades even the nodal point and ensures that these can only ever be points of partial fixity.

However, the hegemonic process that emerges at times of dislocation involves the rising to dominance of a logic of equivalence in political life and from this the production of empty signifiers and antagonism. As argued, the starting point (both theoretically and analytically) is a situation of dislocation, for example, a society where an uprooting force or process has thrown traditional identities, hierarchies and social relations into doubt. In a broader sense, it could be said that this is a situation where there is a proliferation of floating signifiers, where old ideas and institutions are suddenly open to reinterpretation or rejection. In such a situation of insecurity, demands will be made by a broad range of societal groups, which are – qua the logic of difference – initially differentiated by the particularity of each of their specific demands or identities. However, if the dislocation of the societal order proceeds, a situation gradually emerges where an increasing number of various demands cannot be accommodated, or in more general terms where an increasing number of groups do not feel that their identities are being recognised, their privileges respected or their interests protected. Laclau argues that an equivalential logic will potentially begin to emerge between these groups, not necessarily because of any deep or substantial overlap between their particular demands, but simply because these demands are equally frustrated in a given situation (Laclau 1996a, pp. 40–45; Laclau 2005, pp. 72–78). However, if the chain is gradually extended by adding more disappointed or oppressed groups to this emerging political front, then the political space will gradually shift from being characterised by the presence of multiple different demands and interests (that is from a situation where the logic of difference is dominant), to a more dichotomous form in which society appears increasingly split between the ‘chain’ of groups thus made equivalent in and by their frustration, and the regime, power or outside group against which their protests and demands are aimed (i.e. to a situation where a logic of equivalence is dominant). As the chain extends and ever more demands are added to it, so increasingly less substantial content will be shared by all the demands. Finally, the equivalential chain will express little more than a gesture of opposition to the current order with which its individual links have been disappointed in multiple different ways. The chain thereby eventually tends towards representing nothing other than the absence of a societal order able to honour all the various demands (Laclau 1997, pp. 304–311). As Laclau writes, ‘the community created by this equivalential expansion will be, thus, the pure idea of communitarian fullness which is absent – as a result of the presence of the repressive power’ (Laclau 1996a, p. 42). However, this ‘pure idea’ of a better society will still need to be represented somehow, to attain some kind of political signification. Yet any signifier assigned to represent the totality of the chain (i.e. to formulate the content of its overarching common demand) will, Laclau argues, tend towards a certain emptiness, given that it must denote, not an individual link in the chain (and its concrete demand), but must, as such, become a unifying signifier for the chain. This ‘empty signifier’ must, so to speak, mean everything to everybody (ideally embodying all the various demands in the chain in one grand demand), and can in reality, therefore, only be a signifier that means very little, or more precisely, one that has very little precise and concrete content. Thus, an empty signifier does not of course simply mean a signifier without any signified (which would simply be noise (Laclau 2005, p. 105)); rather, Laclau gives the example of slogans such as ‘Justice’ or ‘Respect’, arguing that the extremely malleable meaning of such terms allows
them to function as empty signifiers denoting little more than the absent societal fullness represented in extensive equivalential chains (Laclau 1997, pp. 308–309; Laclau 1996a, pp. 36–46). These signifiers are thus empty, simply because they are made to signify something, which in essence, cannot be signified, namely, the totality of grievances and demands in society, or rather the very fullness that would harmoniously resolve these. The empty signifier therefore has a utopian dimension, it designates, so to speak, the necessarily vague hope for a new and better order in society.

Once again, however, it is crucial for Laclau to emphasize that this equivalential forging of a common utopian hope for a better society can only proceed with the construction of a common enemy. The equivalential chain of demands is initially unified against the ‘repressive’ power, which cannot or will not, honour these demands. But as the unity of the chain tends towards a more empty utopian form, so too does the construction of the common enemy become less concrete (Laclau 2006, p. 655). If the empty signifier ultimately signifies only a common hope for a better society, then the enemy against which it is united comes to signify everything that is wrong with the present one. It is this kind of enmity towards a common enemy, constructed in contrast to an equivalential chain unified around an empty signifier, which Laclau designates as antagonism. For Laclau, antagonism designates the kind of difference that distinguishes different players from the cheat (Laclau 1990, p. 11). The antagonist does not simply represent ‘another way of playing the game’ – that is, an alternative yet legitimate view (of society) – but an opponent who undermines and wrecks the game. As such, antagonistic difference is certainly not the kind that is internal to a discursive order that produces and secures particular identities through differentiation, but a kind of difference that is experienced to prevent, block or undermine identity. In the presence of the antagonist, I cannot be fully myself; the antagonist represents an outside that is experienced as threatening the ‘inside’ (Laclau & Mouffe 1985 [2001], pp. 122–127, Laclau 2005, pp. 83–87).

There are thus strong similarities between the idea of antagonism and the foundational argument about the differential system and its constitutive limits and beyond (cf. Laclau 2004, pp. 318–319). Indeed, in Hegemony and socialist strategy, Laclau and Mouffe conceive of the presence of an antagonist as the source of contingency and dislocation. But in his later works, Laclau instead argues that “dislocation” is an experience more primary than “antagonism”, that the latter is already a discursive inscription of dislocation and that, as such, it is purely contingent and needs discursive conditions of possibility (Laclau 1999, p. 96). Thus, antagonism is not the source of contingency and dislocation in discursive structures, but rather its symptom. It might be said that there is a certain projection going on; in times of dislocation where the coherence of discursive order is indeed destabilised and threatened, an antagonist is constructed as a tangible explanation for this, as an enemy that can embody and bear responsibility for everything that is wrong with society. If we take the example of current nation-state societies affected in various ways by globalisation, the growing support of far-right parties is, of course, accompanied by a growing enmity towards immigrant populations. What Laclau’s understanding of dislocation and antagonism is able to grasp is the potential disconnect between the forces actually challenging various traditional forms of life and the concrete actors who end up being blamed and ostracised. Again, framing such a situation in Laclau’s terms, it might be said that the partial fixity of a national discursive order – secured around the nodal point of the sovereign nation-state – is challenged by various dislocating forces, often grouped under the common heading of globalisation, and this results in an experience of weakened national sovereignty and security in relation to global finance, transnational threats, ‘foreign’ cultural influences, migrant flows or
technological developments. In this situation, a variety of demands will be left unfulfilled, for example, demands for job security, for welfare, for public order/security, or for the preservation of traditional cultural forms. Although these demands are initially logically addressed to state authorities, far-right parties can be said to have successfully equivalated any of these under the empty signifier of national identity, and thus installed immigrant communities as the antagonist thereby experienced as blocking or preventing the utopian unfolding of the harmonious national community with jobs for all, extensive welfare services, safe streets and a familiar cultural homogeneity. The far right has, as such, been able to relaunch the image of a traditional, culturally uniform, national community as an empty signifier around which a wide range of contemporary fears and worries can be equivalated. The hegemony of such parties is, then, a consequence of them being able to offer and embody the empty signifier, and to style themselves as the primary guarantors of its utopian promise and staunch defenders against the antagonistic forces supposedly preventing its realisation.

If, then, the context for hegemony is a dichotomised situation between, from one perspective, an equivalential chain unified around empty signifiers, and on the other, an antagonist constructed to embody everything evil and threatening, then what Laclau calls the hegemonic relationship is exactly what happens when a specific group is able to offer itself as the body or incarnation of the common empty signifier, when, for example, a certain party or leader is able to become the incarnation of ‘justice’ or ‘respect’ (Laclau 1996a, p. 43). It is this dynamic, through which a certain particularity (a distinct group with its own demands and interests) comes to represent the universality of multiple demands and grievances, which Laclau understands as the secret to hegemony. The point, in other words, is that if the equivalential chain has, in the end, little that is concrete and in common, other than a vague utopian notion of ‘justice’ to be attained, then there is immense power available to the group or leader that successfully presents itself, or him- or herself, as the very embodiment of the communal hope for ‘justice’.

In order to explain how something empty of concrete meaning can nevertheless become the lynchpin of a political project, Laclau in his latest work stresses that the empty signifier – although emptied of what we might call strict semantic meaning (i.e. something like a concrete content or definition) – must nevertheless be understood as filled by affect (Laclau 2005, p. 110). The empty signifier is ‘meaningful’ or ‘makes sense’ in an affective mode; it is the object of a radical emotional investment, and can be so only because it is no longer tied to a restrictive semantic meaning. Slavoj Žižek has given the example that the heart of communities is most often made up by exactly such seemingly empty signifiers, claiming that what:

guarantees the community’s consistency is a signifier whose signified is an enigma for the members themselves – nobody really knows what it means, but each of them somehow presumes that others know it, that it has to mean “the real thing”, and so they use it all the time.

(Žižek 2005, p. 305)

Thus, although the heart of a community is intensely emotionally invested in by its members, the attempt to precisely and concretely signify the essence of a community (i.e. what it really means to be English, Danish, Austrian, etc.) is rarely successful and often ends up recycling a set of stereotypically conventional expressions or metaphors. This mysterious core of community is never adequately captured – no matter how many concepts are loaded
onto it, there is always something more that could be said – or rather ‘it’ (e.g. Englishness, Danishness, etc.) is always somehow more than can be articulated.

In Laclau’s latest book, *On populist reason*, he increasingly draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis. He can thus point out that the hegemonic process through which a particular element or actor comes to embody the empty signifier, unifying a vast equivalential chain, can be understood as a political version of the logic of sublimation defined by Lacan as ‘the elevation of an ordinary object to the dignity of the Thing [das Ding]’ (Laclau 2005, p. 113). In Lacan’s thinking, the Thing is the original site of *jouissance* (a state of affective intensity, of bliss or joy, sometimes given as the experience in the mother–child dyad), which is forever lost as the subject enters the world of language in the Symbolic realm. And yet, the desire for this *jouissance* remains and leads the subject to affectively invest in, or more precisely sublimate, various partial objects (which Lacan calls *objet petit a*) imagined to embody the *jouissance* of the Thing. In comparing this kind of dynamic with the one he himself has described as core to the hegemonic relationship, Laclau goes so far as to conclude that ‘[t]he logic of the *objet petit a* and the hegemonic logic are not just similar: they are simply identical’ (Laclau 2005, p. 116). In Lacanian psychoanalysis, Laclau has found an explanation, or at least corroboration, for the fact that empty signifiers seem to command a radical emotional or affective investment. The crucial insight that Laclau embeds in his theory of hegemony is then that semantic vacuity is no obstacle to affective investment – quite the opposite, in fact. And as such, the process of hegemony – of assembling a political front across concrete interests and demands – unfolds in the realm of affect, rather than through semantic stringency or precision.

An apt example that can sum up many of the points made so far might be former US President Obama’s first campaign for office in 2008. The presidential campaign in 2008 certainly proceeded, in a US context seemingly dislocated in various ways. Not only did the financial crisis burst into the public’s awareness amid the election campaign, with the collapse of Lehman Brothers in September 2008, but also, in a wider sense, it could be suggested that the kind of purpose and zeal that had succeeded 9/11, and galvanised American society behind President Bush in the War on Terror, were waning and fragmenting as it became clear that such a war would tend to drag on, and, as critique of the US mounted in the wake of, for example, the Abu Ghraib scandal and the disregard the Bush administration had shown to the UN and to the traditional European allies of the US. There was, in other words, a wide range of grievances and demands that addressed the supposed shortcomings of the Bush administration, varying from its foreign policy and its ‘pampering’ of big business and Wall Street to its lack of initiative on issues of welfare and healthcare, and so on. Obama’s actual political programme did of course concretely address some of these, but it quickly became apparent that his appeal was somehow more than the sum of his concrete answers. Increasingly, the Obama Campaign zoomed in on a few successful empty signifiers, namely ‘Hope’ and ‘Change’. Indeed, it must be admitted that little could have been found as a campaign slogan that would have been less concrete than these two concepts. It seemed now that the promise of, or indeed the hope for, a different societal order – for a changed society – was able to unify a long list of different groups, minorities and interests in an equivalential chain, and that whatever each was more concretely hoping for and believed the concrete necessary change to be, it was, for everyone, Obama who came to embody the utopian emptiness of ‘Change’ and ‘Hope’ themselves. Clearly then, the rush of support that was later termed ‘Obamamania’ was precisely not constituted by the ‘semantic precision’ or argumentative rigour of Obama’s political discourse, but rather by the affective investment through which various groups seemed to sublimate him into something almost akin to a national saviour.
Conclusion

In the end, it is worth re-emphasising that Laclau himself is first and foremost a political philosopher who is primarily interested in the ontological preconditions for the political. What he offers is a field of concepts that allows us to think about what political hegemony entails outside or across any specific political contexts, and thus an idea of what kinds of questions might be posed and what kind of dynamics might be tracked in a concrete instance of political struggle. But Laclau’s theory does not entail anything resembling a hands-on method of investigation. When David Howarth (2004, p. 267) at one point raised the need for a so-called ‘middle-range’ theorisation that would better connect the ontological arguments in Laclau’s work with concrete ‘ontic’ cases and analyses, Laclau wholly agreed, but did not then see the need for it to be him that developed such a middle-range tier of arguments (Laclau 2004, p. 321). To work with Laclau’s theory in concrete cases will always involve looking for means to cover this middle-range ground, and it will analytically involve asking how elements recognised through the theory (e.g. an antagonistic conflict, a chain of equivalence, a hegemonic relationship, or an empty signifier) appear and are constructed in specific political, historical and cultural circumstances.

The original formulation of Laclau’s (and Mouffe’s) discourse theory in Hegemony and socialist strategy is now some 30 years old. However, due to its constant development and re-articulation, both by Laclau himself and by others, it has not been allowed to become dated. Concepts and ideas, such as chains of equivalence, nodal points, empty signifiers, dislocation and antagonism have spread and found many uses in constructivist or post-structuralist social and political analyses. And with Laclau’s final turn to psychoanalysis, he was again changing the agenda for the study of political hegemonies. While Hegemony and socialist strategy left behind Marxist ideas of a material basis for society, in favour of an uncompromising insistence on its discursive constitution, Laclau’s Lacanian engagements in On populist reason suggest – in his own terms – an expansion of the theoretical focus from one concerned most with the (discursive) ‘form’ of political hegemonies, to one which seeks to understand the sources of their (affective) ‘force’ (Laclau 2005, p. 110). This certainly is still a central and crucial ambition in any attempt to analyse contemporary political phenomena.

References


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