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## Power, discourse, and policy: articulating a hegemony approach to critical policy studies

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In this article, I argue that power and hegemony are vital for critically explaining a range of policymaking practices. Developing the basic assumptions of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's poststructuralist discourse theory, in which discourse is understood as an articulatory practice, I first elaborate the concept of power in relation to the work of Michel Foucault, Steven Lukes, and others. Power in this picture consists of radical *acts* of decision and institution, which involve the drawing of political frontiers via the creation of multiple lines of inclusion and exclusion. The exercise of power thus *constitutes* and *produces* practices, policies, and regimes. But power is also evident in the sedimentation of social relations via various techniques of political management, and through the elaboration of ideologies and fantasies, where the function of the latter is to *conceal* the radical contingency of social relations and to *naturalize* relations of domination. In elaborating this conception of power, I draw upon a neo-Gramscian concept of hegemony, which speaks to the construction and deconstruction of political coalitions, as well as the stabilization of practices and policy regimes into partially fixed historical blocs and formations. I conclude by setting out a five step approach that articulates the concepts of power and hegemony into a method of conducting critical policy studies.

**Keywords:** power; hegemony; policymaking practices; fantasy; ideology

### 1. Introduction

In response to a somewhat impatient questioner, who asked about the role of power in his Distinguished Lecture to the Centre for Theoretical Studies at Essex University, Richard Rorty roundly asserted that he did not have a place for the concept of power in his political philosophy. 'Power', he declared, 'is too *big* a concept for me.' He preferred less meta-physical and totalizing notions like 'cruelty', 'tolerance', and 'human dignity' to develop his vision of a 'liberal utopia' (Rorty 1989).<sup>1</sup> In this article, I want to explore no less than *three* big and highly contested concepts in political theory – power, discourse, and policy – and then say something about their interrelationships. Although the task is challenging, it is my belief that the clarification and articulation of these notions is indispensable for the conduct of critical policy studies. The problem is how we should conceptualize power and domination; how we should then relate power and domination to notions like discourse, subjectivity, and hegemony; and finally how we should integrate the ideas of power and domination more explicitly into our critical explanations of policy problems.

Put in a nutshell, I shall argue that in one important respect power consists of radical *acts* of institution, which involve the elaboration of political frontiers and the drawing of lines of

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inclusion and exclusion. In this conception, the exercise of power *constitutes* and *produces* practices and social relations. But it is also involved in the sedimentation and reproduction of social relations via the mobilization of various techniques of political management, and through the elaboration of ideologies and fantasies. The function of the latter is to *conceal* the radical contingency of social relations and to *naturalize* relations of domination. Power is thus intimately related to domination, though the latter is not reducible to the former, and the precise connection between power and domination must be carefully conceptualized. By thus stressing the primacy of politics, and by introducing the category of fantasy, I shall endeavor to provide the means to draw an analytical distinction between legitimate and illegitimate exercises of power, whilst also offering the resources to distinguish between relations of subordination, domination, and oppression, and then to furnish a way of relating them.

Central to the development of this argument is a particular conception of hegemony, which emerges out of the Marxist tradition of social and political theory. There is a body of thought that has strongly questioned the continued relevance of this concept for analyzing and criticizing our contemporary societies. For example, commentators like Jon Beasley-Murray and Scott Lash have argued that the concept of hegemony, as well as associated notions such as ideology critique, are no longer relevant in our current situation, and that the category of ‘posthegemony’ is more appropriate (e.g. Beasley-Murray 2003, Lash 2007, but see also Johnson 2007).

By contrast, I shall argue that hegemony is crucial for our understanding of power, domination, and ideology, as well as critical policy studies. In fact, I shall stress two connected aspects of hegemony. On the one hand, hegemony is a kind of political practice that captures the making and breaking of political projects and discourse coalitions. But on the other hand it is also a form of rule or governance that speaks to the maintenance of the policies, practices and regimes that are formed by such forces. This second aspect of hegemony concerns the various ways in which regimes, policies, or practices grip or hold a subject fast, or fail to do so. It concerns the affective dimension of politics.

In short, therefore, I shall argue that power is an ontological feature of social practices and relations. At root, this is because all social forms are the result of political struggles and decisions. This axiom thus applies equally to the complex practices of policy-making and policy implementation, as power and hegemony can inform the critical explanation and evaluation of policy. Policy change is often connected to the struggle between opposed forces, whilst policies are often stabilized and maintained by the construction of fantasies and ideologies that secure the consent of subjects, as well as complex political techniques and tactics.

In developing this argument, I shall begin by drawing on the work of Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and others to develop a poststructuralist conception of discourse. After setting out the implications of this approach for political analysis, I shall turn to the conceptual relationship between discourse and power, where I explore the work of Michel Foucault and some of his followers. I then build upon Foucault’s path-breaking thoughts on this topic to elaborate a hegemony approach to power. I shall conclude by attending to some of the methodological questions that have to be answered if this perspective can inform the practice of critical policy studies.

## 2. The concept of discourse

The last few years have brought an enormous interest in the concept of discourse in the social sciences, as well as the development of new forms of discourse analysis. Alongside traditional concerns with conversation analysis, speech act theory, and various forms of

textual research, Michel Foucault and his followers have developed archaeological and genealogical approaches to analyze scientific discourses and systems of power/knowledge; Norman Fairclough has elaborated a program of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), whilst Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak have advanced a Discourse Historical Approach to discourse analysis; Frank Fischer, Herbert Gottweis and Maarten Hajer have developed various forms of discourse analysis in the field of policy studies. At the same time, approaches to discursive psychology have been put forward by theorists like Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell, and then problematized by critics such as Erica Burman and Ian Parker. Laclau, Mouffe and others associated with the Essex School of Discourse Analysis have articulated a post-Marxist theory of discourse.<sup>2</sup>

These approaches reflect the different theoretical *starting-points* of the theorists involved, as well as the conceptual *resources* they draw upon in transforming their various points of departure. What I shall call Poststructuralist Discourse Theory stems initially from attempts by Laclau and Mouffe to use the innovative theoretical categories of Gramsci and Althusser to tackle problems of class reductionism and economic determinism in Marxist theory. In general, these difficulties can be gathered together under the *problem of essentialism*: the idea that a society, the human subject, or the objects that we encounter in social life, have fixed essences that exhaust *what* these entities are. Theoretical and empirical practices then operate on the basis of these given forms and objects. By contrast, post-structuralist discourse theorists draw upon the writings of Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Žižek and others to stress the radical contingency and historicity of social objectivity, as well as the primacy of politics and power in its formation.

But *what* is discourse in this approach? Let us begin by recalling some of the opening remarks of the *Philosophical Investigations*, in which Wittgenstein asks us to imagine a builder, A, and an assistant, B, building with assorted stones: A calls out the words ‘block’, ‘slab’, ‘beam’ and ‘pillar’, and B passes the stones to A who inserts them into the building or wall. Wittgenstein (2001, p.4) calls this ‘whole’, consisting of both ‘language and the actions into which it is woven’ a ‘language game’. In a microcosmic form, what Wittgenstein calls a ‘language game’ more or less corresponds to what we call a ‘discourse’ or a ‘discursive structure’. I want to flesh out four features of this idea.

As a first approximation, in John Dryzek’s words, discourse can be defined as ‘a shared way of apprehending the world’, which ‘enables those who subscribe to it to interpret bits of information and put them together into coherent stories or accounts’ (Dryzek 1997, p. 8). However, discourse is not *only* about representations and systems of meaning, where the latter are understood in purely cognitive or ideational terms; nor do subjects simply ‘subscribe’ to shared ways of perceiving and understanding the world. This is because discourse is a richer *ontological* category, which captures something about the complex *character* of all social relations and practices, as well as the ways subjects identify and are captured by certain meaningful practices. As Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 96, emphasis added) insist, ‘a *discursive structure* is not a merely “cognitive” or “contemplative” entity; it is an *articulatory practice* which constitutes and organizes social relations’.

Secondly, Wittgenstein’s idea of a language game highlights the fact that discourses are *relational configurations* of elements that comprise agents (or subjects), words, actions, and things. These elements are individuated and rendered intelligible within the *context* of a particular practice, namely, the activity of constructing the wall. What is more, in this approach each element of a discursive structure acquires its meaning only in relation to the others. To put this point in more formal terms, drawing on Saussure (1983) and structural linguistics more generally, a discourse consists of a system of signifiers without positive terms, in which the identity of each element depends on its differences

with others. The meaning of the word ‘father’ in the English language depends on its difference from terms like ‘mother’, ‘son’, ‘daughter’, and so forth.

When formalized in this way, a third feature of the concept of discourse is that the relational and differential character of language can be extended to hold for *all* signifying or meaningful structures and practices.<sup>3</sup> This does not mean that everything *is* language, but rather that the properties of language hold for all meaningful and articulatory configurations. Institutions like states, markets or governance networks can be conceptualized as more or less sedimented systems of discourse, that is, partially fixed systems of rules, norms, resources, practices and subjectivities that are linked together in particular ways.

Finally, drawing on Derrida and Lacan, proponents of poststructuralist discourse theory stress the *radical contingency* and *structural undecidability* of discursive structures. This arises because it is assumed that all systems of meaning are in a fundamental sense lacking or incomplete, and this absence or negativity prevents the full constitution of discursive structures. Every discursive structure in this perspective is thus dislocated, and this ‘out of joint-ness’ is evident in particular *events* that show their incompleteness. For example, it is assumed that any particular policy regime or practice will exhibit inconsistencies or tensions, as well as various exclusions or negations, which cannot be captured by any essential set of rules or principles.

Derrida’s deconstructive readings of metaphysical texts show how discursive structures are marked by blindspots and exclusions that cannot be reduced to an essential rationality or an underlying logic. Discourses thus exhibit moments of *structural undecidability*, in which the argumentative logic of the text is poised between two equally plausible lines of development (e.g. Derrida 1981, p. 43, 1988, pp. 116, 148). In Derrida’s words, these moments of undecidability require the taking of ‘ethico-theoretical decisions’ that exclude certain possibilities, though the latter are often concealed by dominant ideologies and metaphysical drives (Derrida 1973). For example, in his readings of Rousseau and Husserl, Derrida deconstructs the binary oppositions of nature/culture or speech/writing by exposing an ambiguous logic of the supplement. On the one hand, the supplement merely adds to a full presence; on the other hand, the very need for a supplement suggests that it completes or fulfils something that is lacking in the origin. However, rather than prioritizing the origin (e.g. nature or speech) or the supplement (e.g. culture or writing), Derrida seeks to invert and reinscribe the two terms in a new conceptual infrastructure that captures their interaction and ‘play’. The supplement does not merely ‘add to’ something that is already there – a continuous modification of the present – nor does it wholly replace or complete the problematic origin that it supplements with its own content (Derrida 1976, p. 144). Instead, the reworked logic of supplementarity highlights the claim that any structure or presence harbors absence that cannot be subsumed, whilst suggesting varying degrees of interaction between the two elements, rather than a difference in kind between fully-fledged entities.<sup>4</sup>

This ambiguity is evident in the relationship between speech and writing. Writing does not simply *re-present* speech, which in turn *re-presents* our ideas, as the properties of writing – its material inscription and its ability to function in the radical absence of the writer and the reader – inform *all* types of communication. Indeed, it is the very existence of these properties that makes possible all forms of communication, including speaking, writing, and so forth (Derrida 1982). Writing thus serves as a ‘constitutive outside’: even though it is excluded from speech as the true object of communication, it is in fact required if we are to speak and be understood at all. Writing is thus the condition of possibility for speech, whilst also highlighting the latter’s deficiencies and limits (see Staten 1984).<sup>5</sup>

Very schematically, therefore, on the basis of these assumptions and arguments, it is possible to disaggregate two key aspects of discourse theory: the discursive and discourse. I shall take the *discursive* to be an ontological category – i.e. a categorical presupposition for our understanding of particular entities and social relations – whereby every object or any symbolic order is meaningful, that is, situated in a field of significant differences and similarities. But equally in this approach, following thinkers like Heidegger, Lacan, and Derrida, it also means that such entities are *incomplete* and thus *radically contingent*. Each system is marked by a lack, and their meaning or objectivity depends on the way they are socially and politically constructed.

By contrast, the concept of *discourse* refers to particular systems of meaningful or articulatory practice. Thatcherism or New Labour in the UK, or the different forms of the apartheid system in South Africa, or the radical environmentalism associated with social movements in contemporary societies, are all discourses in this sense of the term. It follows from my rendering of the discursive that these systems are finite and contingent constructions, which are constituted politically by the construction of social antagonisms and the creation of political frontiers. Every discursive formation thus involves the exercise of power, as well certain forms of exclusion, and this means that every discursive structure is uneven and hierarchical.

### 3. Implications for social and political theory

The philosophical assumptions of discourse theory provide a general horizon for understanding and explaining various aspects of social life. But further work is required to make them applicable for political analysis, especially in the domain of policy research. The first and crucial question in this regard concerns the way social actors respond to the radical contingency and undecidability of social relations. Does their experience of radical contingency lead to the construction of political demands and claims? Do these demands form wider projects or coalitions that can bring about social or policy change? Or are they incorporated into existing systems of power, deflected to the margins of society, or simply repressed?

To answer these questions I shall begin by setting out some of the social and political *implications* of poststructuralist discourse theory. First, the concept of discourse enables us to develop a *relational* account of social forms, such as the state, economy or governance networks. Discourse theorists draw on Gramsci, the later Poulantzas, and French regulation theory, to conceptualize social formations as relational *historical blocs* or *regimes*, which consist of contingent economic, social, cultural and political elements, whose form and identity depend on the political inclusion and exclusion of certain elements (e.g. Aglietta 2000, Gramsci 1971, Lipietz 1987, 1992, Poulantzas 1978). Historical blocs are in turn constructed through *hegemonic* practices, where the latter are predicated on the division of social spaces through the establishment of political frontiers. The drawing of political boundaries presupposes the construction of antagonistic relations between differently positioned actors through the logics of equivalence and difference.

Secondly, in this perspective, the concept of antagonism has a constitutive role. It is the construction of antagonisms – in which the presence of an ‘Other’ blocks the identity of a subject – that discloses the *limits* of a practice or *regime of practices*. The construction of antagonisms involves the drawing of boundaries and the creation of political frontiers, which in turn make possible the constitution of blocs and regimes (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, pp. 122–127). But they also disclose other courses of action: other ways of thinking, doing and organizing things. In short, they make visible the *undecidability* of any structure, and its production via political decisions and actions (Laclau 1990).

A third consequence of this conception of discourse makes possible an anti-essentialist account of *social* and *political identities*. Identities in this perspective are not given or primordial entities, which are reducible to real interests or structural locations in a social formation, but precarious constructions that are constituted by political practices of inclusion and exclusion. Constructing an identity is thus an act of power, for it excludes other possibilities and forms of the self. In short, social and political identities are vulnerable and incomplete entities, which emerge and are constituted through processes of *identification* and *investment*.

But this brings us, fourthly, to the question of the subject. The dialectics of identity and identification give rise to a particular understanding of *subjectivity* and *agency*. However, the first thing to note in this regard is that the latter are not reducible to questions of identity. Instead discourse theorists distinguish between *subject positions* within a discourse – places of enunciation that subjects can occupy in speaking and acting for instance – and a more radical notion of political subjectivity in which subjects *act* or *decide* in novel ways. This arises when they identify with new objects or discourses. The condition of possibility for the latter form of subjectivity is the *dislocation* of sedimented social structures, and the idea of a ‘lacking subject’ that is divided between its identity and the ever-present threat of its dissolution or negation when structures are disrupted (Laclau 1996, pp. 92–95).

More precisely, when the void or undecidability at the heart of any social order is made visible by events, new forms of political agency are made possible. It is the *failure* of structures to provide stable points from which to speak or act that opens the space for a more radical form of subjectivity in which social actors are literally compelled to be free, and to *identify* with new possibilities. Here the sharp opposition between structures and agents begins to dissolve, and discourse theory provides a novel twist to dialectical accounts of structure, agency, and power (Laclau 1990).<sup>6</sup>

This dialectical interplay between identity and identification is important because it opens the prospect of choice and freedom – and thus the exercise of power – for the subject. It thus offers a novel perspective on the so-called ‘structure/agency’ problem. First, it problematizes essentialist conceptions that privilege the determining role of either structure or agency. But it also contests dualistic conceptions which are predicated on an external relationship between structures and agents. Instead, it begins with a ‘thrown’ subject – a subject that is nothing but the practices and identities conferred by its culture or ‘world’ – where the split between subject and structure is covered over. However, if both the structure and subject are marked by a fundamental foreclosure – an impossibility which becomes evident in moments of disruption – then in certain conditions the subject is able to act in a strong sense: to identify with new objects and ideologies. This moment of identification is the moment of the radical subject, which discloses the subject as an agent in its world.

#### 4. Discourse theory and power: Foucault’s three models

I have already implied that the concepts of discourse and power are intimately related in different ways. But various approaches have sought to connect these two elements. These include supporters of Critical Discourse Analysis and the Discourse Historical Approach, as well as proponents of Argumentative and Discursive Policy Analysis (e.g. Fairclough 1995, Fairclough and Wodak 1997, Hajer 1995). Yet perhaps the most developed has been put forward by Foucault, who has developed at least three ways of doing this, each of which mirrors his different methodological orientations.

Foucault's earlier archaeological analysis of knowledge focuses on the production of *statements* or *serious* speech acts (e.g. Foucault 1972, 1978, 1981). These are utterances which qualify as candidates for truth and falsity because they conform to a historically specific system of rules. They are held to be true or false because they are accepted as such by the relevant community of experts. Foucault thus examines those discursive practices in which subjects are empowered to make serious truth claims about objects that are constituted within particular discursive formations and they can do so because of their training, institutional location, and mode of discourse. For example, assertions and predictions about the prospects of global warming only become statements when they are uttered by suitably qualified scientists and climate experts who present plausible theories and evidence to justify their arguments. Foucault is thus able to account for the rarity of scientific discourse; the way science is demarcated from non-science; the relationship between science and ideology; the powerful constraints and conditions that regulate and limit the articulation of statements; and so forth (Foucault 1981).

Power is important in this model both in terms of locating those moments of exclusion, in which certain statements are condemned to what he calls 'a wild exteriority', and in highlighting a positive set of rules, procedures and mechanisms that makes possible the production of discourse (Foucault 1981). But as Foucault himself later admitted, the question of power remained implicit and undertheorized in his early work. For example, Foucault (1980, p. 119) notes that an important defining moment in his understanding of power occurred when he realized its 'positive' effects: 'What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression'. At the same time, his quasi-structuralist theory of discourse ran aground on a series of methodological contradictions, not least because his purely descriptive intent pushed against the critical potential of the enterprise, whilst the role of the archaeologist as both a producer and critic of discourse was not clarified (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, pp. 79–100).

By contrast, his Nietzschean-inspired genealogical approach broadens the notion of discourse to include non-discursive practices, whilst stressing the constitutive function of power in the formation and operation of scientific knowledge. In a justly famous passage in *Discipline and Punish*, he thus argues that power and knowledge are mutually constitutive:

Perhaps, too, we should abandon the whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where the power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop only outside its injunctions, demands, and interests. Perhaps we should abandon the belief that power makes mad and that, by the same token, the renunciation of power is one of the conditions of knowledge. We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not *presuppose* and at the same time constitute power relations. (Foucault 1977, p. 27)

In this picture, Foucault stresses the interweaving of various systems of 'power-knowledge', such as criminology or psychiatry, and examines their role in producing and disciplining social subjects like 'the criminal', 'the delinquent' or 'the insane'. His genealogical investigations display the contingent and ignoble origins of such systems, whilst stressing the role of power and conflict in forging identities, rules, and social forms (Foucault 1984c).

But though Foucault broadens the scope of his investigations to study the role of social and political institutions, whilst making his concept of power more explicit, there are still remainders. Not only does he tend to conflate his account of power-knowledge with his critique of the scientificity of the human sciences, but he tends to reduce subjectivity to the disciplining and ordering of ‘docile bodies’, leaving little or no space for human freedom and agency. He also eschews the role of meaning and the symbolic order in the name of a warlike struggle between forces.

However, in his final writings on sexuality, governmentality, and subjectivity, Foucault offers a third model of discourse and power, which seems to address these difficulties. Here he modifies his critique of the juridical model of sovereign power by developing a more strategic perspective. The idea emerges in the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*. Here he argues that

Power is everywhere: not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere . . . Power is not an institution, nor a structure, nor a possession. It is the name we give to a complex strategic situation in a particular society. (Foucault 1979, p. 93, emphasis added).

This new strategic perspective enables Foucault to rethink the relationship between domination, power and discourse, whilst developing his novel account of governmentality.

In a late interview published in *The Final Foucault*, he thus articulates his most suggestive account of the relationship between domination, power, discourse, and freedom (Foucault 1991b, p. 12). He begins by referring to ‘states of domination’, in which ‘relations of power are fixed in such a way that there are perpetually asymmetrical and the margin of liberty is extremely limited.’<sup>7</sup> Here the category of *domination* refers to relatively fixed systems of control, which strongly reduce the freedom of the subject, thus confining it to sedimented positions within a social structure. The delineation of effective states of domination – economic, social, institutional or sexual – poses particular problems for the question of resistance. Where will resistance be organized? Who will conduct such resistance? What will be the form and strategies of resistance? Issues pertaining to our understanding of resistance are thus directly connected to precise forms of domination.

What, then, about the concept of power in this picture? According to Foucault, the exercise of power *presupposes* a weakening of control – a crisis or dislocation of the structure so to speak – and the emergence of possibilities not evident in the existing structure of domination. ‘If one or the other were completely at the disposition of the other and became his thing’, argues Foucault, ‘an object on which he can exercise an infinite and unlimited violence, there would not be relations of power’ (Foucault 1991b, p. 12). Instead, in his words, ‘there cannot be relations of power unless the subjects are free’. And this means that

to exercise a relation of power, there must be on both sides at least a certain form of liberty. Even though the relation of power may be completely unbalanced or when one can truly say that he has ‘all power’ over the other, a power can only be exercised over another to the extent that the latter still has the possibility of committing suicide, of jumping out of the window or of killing the other. That means that in the relations of power, there is necessarily the possibility of resistance, for if there were no possibility of resistance – of violent resistance, of escape, of ruse, of strategies that reverse the situation – there would be no relations of power. (Foucault 1991b, p. 12)

Foucault’s understanding of power thus posits a certain degree of *freedom* for social agents both to maintain systems of domination and to propose counter strategies of resistance.

He thus refuses to answer questions like, 'If power is everywhere, then how can there be freedom or liberty?', but argues instead that 'if there are relations of power throughout every social field it is because there is freedom everywhere' (Foucault 1991b, p. 12). At this level of analysis, therefore, any struggle designed to modify existing social relations and to institute a new system of domination encounters *resistance* that has to be overcome. This assumes that any drive to create a new system of power will itself be an unstable configuration, always vulnerable to change and transformation.<sup>8</sup> In the language of poststructuralist discourse theory, any social structure involves an exercise of power and is always dislocated. It thus presupposes something that exceeds it; the rendering visible of this dislocatory condition makes possible new forms of identification and acts of institution.

### 5. The two faces of hegemony

Foucault's various accounts of discourse undoubtedly lay the basis for a poststructuralist conception of power. Yet they are not without difficulty. Of particular concern is how he links his detailed studies of subjectivity and agency – his so-called micro-physics of power – to his broader account of social structure and domination, which he sometimes captures by delineating an all-encompassing logic of bio-power. We seem to be confronted either with a totalizing story of disciplinary power, in which power produces and controls 'docile bodies', or detailed accounts of the meticulous rituals of power and technologies of the self.

At other times, we are also asked to choose between a focus on ideology and symbolic meanings, or an immanent materialism that focuses on the warlike clash of forces. For example, in some later reflections on the concept of power, he argues: 'Here I believe one's point of reference should not be to the great model of language (*langue*) and signs, but to that of war and battle. The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning' (Foucault 1980, p. 114). Power is thus detached from language, meaning and discourse.

It is here that the poststructuralist concepts of politics and hegemony are vital. As I have suggested, the construction of any discourse involves the taking of decisions in an undecidable terrain. But for a decision to be taken in these circumstances other possible alternatives must be repressed. This means that the institution of a social identity is always an act of power. Hence, as Laclau puts it, 'the "objectivity" arising from a decision is formed, in its most fundamental sense, as a power relationship' (Laclau 1990, p. 30).<sup>9</sup>

Now, the construction and institution of discourse in poststructuralist discourse theory is understood in terms of hegemonic practices. What is hegemony and how does it relate to power? The category is multi-faceted, but I shall emphasize two aspects here. First, hegemony is a type of political practice that captures the making and breaking of political coalitions. Secondly, hegemony can be seen as a form of rule that can elucidate the way in which a regime, practice or policy holds sway over a set of subjects by winning their consent or securing their compliance. These two faces of hegemony are, of course, intimately related. Hegemony as a form of rule presupposes various practices of transformism, negotiation, compromise and bargaining in order to safeguard and reproduce a regime or practice, whilst the struggle to develop counter-hegemonic movements presupposes certain forms of rule, which the movements challenge and seek to transform. At the same time, a form of rule is the outcome of hegemonic projects that have won consent or secured acquiescence in various contexts and sites. Yet on analytical, if not ontological grounds, it is possible to separate these two aspects, and then connect them to the concept of power. I shall thus focus on each in turn.

## 6. Hegemony as a practice of coalition-building

As I have suggested, hegemony can in the first place be seen as a political practice that involves the linking together of disparate demands to forge projects or ‘discourse coalitions’ that can contest a particular form of rule, practice or policy. These practices presuppose the existence of antagonisms and the presence of ‘floating signifiers’ that can be articulated by rival political forces. Hegemony in this sense represents a metonymical operation in which contiguous elements are connected together by a displacement mechanism, in which demands in one site of the social are extended and taken-up in another.

Hegemony is thus a type of political relation that creates equivalences between disparate elements via the construction of political frontiers that divide social relations; the identities that compose such equivalential chains are then modified by this practice. For example, demands of local campaigns to oppose a particular airport expansion can be linked together with demands arising from other campaigns in different parts of the country, so as to construct a broader coalition. Demands to halt airport expansion more generally can also be linked to wider social demands – such as demands for better public transport or greater social justice – by finding points of equivalence amongst these different struggles. In this case, the very identities and demands of local struggles will be modified to reflect their more universal character, whilst the content of the new demand will be given by a more general opposition to a government’s overall national policy of airport expansion, and/or to its environmental consequences (Griggs and Howarth 2004).

The first face of hegemony shares a certain family resemblance with Robert Dahl’s intuitive concept of power – ‘*A* has power over *B* to the extent that he can get *B* to do something that *B* would not otherwise do’ (Dahl 1957, pp. 202–203) – though we need to strip Dahl’s concept of its dubious ontological and epistemological presuppositions. In other words, power can be understood as the ability of an actor or agent to affect another, even though pluralists and behaviorists like Dahl tended to restrict their focus to the measurement of an actor’s ability to win decisions on key issues in observable decision-making situations, and they restricted their conception of interests to those preferences that were explicitly articulated within the policy process. This account necessarily implies disagreement, or in Lukes’ words, ‘an observable, *conflict* of subjective interests, seen as express policy preferences, revealed by political participation’ (Lukes 2005, p. 19).<sup>10</sup>

Yet this focus on the imposition of one project’s values and interests *over* another should not come at the expense of deeper processes and more complicated logics. For one thing, though overt conflicts are often resolved by majority decisions in parliaments, cabinets, and various administrative sites, and can often be the result of powerful figures like prime ministers or presidents imposing their will upon others, the hegemony perspective insists on the need to explore the various discursive and hegemonic operations that make such decisions possible. An exploration of these conditions helps us to clarify our grammar of ‘power over’ in the fields of politics and policy.

Critical in this regard is the making and breaking of projects or discourse coalitions. Here the immediate focus is to explore the intersecting logics of equivalence and difference to characterize and explain the coupling or decoupling of heterogeneous social demands. But this involves important rhetorical elements as well. Even William Riker (1986, 1996), one of the founders of contemporary rational choice, has supplemented formal rational choice theory with an emphasis on the role of rhetoric in the forging and disruption of political coalitions. In a telling phrase, Riker (1986) coined the term ‘heres-*thetic*’ to capture the ‘art of political manipulation’ by which politicians used a variety of strategic devices to bring about favorable outcomes. These devices include practices of

determining who are to be the relevant sets of agents in a particular situation; inventing new actions and political practices that circumvent existing ones; framing and reframing the evaluation of outcomes by others so that actors can improve their prospects of achieving goals; altering the perceptions and character of individual preferences by various rhetorical operations and interventions; and so on (Riker 1996, see Shepsle 2003, pp. 309–310).

But of equal importance in this regard is the construction of new discourses that can win over subjects to a particular project or coalition, whilst disorganizing and marginalizing opposing coalitions. One way of doing this involves the practice of ‘rhetorical re-description’ (e.g. Rorty 1989, Skinner 2002). In the contemporary context, this trope has been most developed by Quentin Skinner (2002, p. 183), for whom the practice of rhetorical re-description consists

of replacing a given evaluative description with a rival term that serves to picture the action no less plausibly, but serves at the same time to place it in a contrasting moral light. You seek to persuade your audience to accept your new description, and thereby to adopt a new attitude towards the action concerned.

Using one of Quintillian’s illustrations, Skinner (2002, p. 183) shows how ‘prodigality’ can in this fashion ‘be more leniently re-described as liberality, avarice as carefulness, negligence as simplicity of mind’.

As Skinner suggests, it is not the conceptual content of events, practices, or actions which through their descriptions determine the invoked name (see Glynos and Howarth 2007). Instead the conceptual change is the *outcome* of debates over how to characterize or name something:

The more we succeed in persuading people that a given evaluative term applies in circumstances in which they may never have thought of applying it, the more broadly and inclusively we shall persuade them to employ the given term in the appraisal of social and political life. (Skinner 2002, p. 186)

For example, supporters of the UK aviation industry have sought to re-describe the continued expansion of the aviation industry not as a threat to the environment, but as a vehicle for ‘sustainable aviation’ and the pursuit of ‘sustainable growth’. Drawing on radical environmental and development discourses – demands for ‘sustainable development’ in the face of the ‘limits to growth’ for example – organic intellectuals associated with the British Airports Authority (BAA), British Airways (BA), and the various groups that have advanced their cause, have thus substituted a rival evaluative term based on the qualifier ‘sustainable’ to counter efforts by environmentalists and not-in-my-back-yard (NIMBY) groups intent on presenting the expansion of the aviation industry as ‘unsustainable’, ‘unnecessary’, and ‘subsidized’, thus requiring the demand for air travel to be ‘managed’ and ‘limited’ (Howarth and Griggs 2006).

The logic of rhetorical re-description goes hand-in-hand with the practice of structuring the terrain of argumentation so that certain demands and interests are organized in and out of the policy-making process. To adapt Schattschneider’s marvelous phrase, all forms of argumentation exude a partiality in favor of exploiting certain kinds of conflict and suppressing others because argumentation and rhetoric is ‘the mobilization of bias’: some issues and arguments are organized into politics while others are organized out (Schattschneider 1960, p. 71). For example, if opponents of aviation expansion were to accept that the current struggles about airport expansion were about the achievement of ‘sustainable aviation’, they would immediately rule out more radical demands and claims. The logic of

rhetorical redescription and the structuring of various terrains of argumentation finds echoes in what Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz (1962, 1963, 1970) famously called the ‘power of non-decisionmaking’, that is, the decision not to decide by immunizing core issues from debate and contestation through agenda setting, and so on. I shall take up this so-called second face of power – as well as the third – when I discuss the character of hegemony as form.

Finally, the formation and dissolution of discourse coalitions also *presupposes* the construction of identities and the emergence of political subjects. Subjects and identities in this perspective do not pre-exist their struggles and conflicts. Instead, in many cases, they are actually produced in the very construction of projects and coalitions: they emerge in the complicated practices through which groups and agents seek to *represent* and *articulate* their demands, identities and constituencies. As I noted in my initial discussion of Derrida’s deconstruction of speech and writing, the practice of representation is never simply about the *re*-presentation of something that is already there – something that is given or present in a set of preferences and interests – but involves a complex relaying movement between leaders and constituencies in an effort to forge a representation that is never transparent or complete. This relaying movement operates between many different levels and sites of the policy process, and thus involves a constant modification and augmentation of interests as issues are negotiated in different forums and spaces. Power thus operates at the bedrock of social and political processes, and does not just supervene on such processes.

In short, then, if the first face of hegemony foregrounds the metonymical dimension of political practices – the way in which a particular group or movement begins to take on tasks and activities in adjacent or contiguous spheres of social relations, thus seeking to hegemonize such demands – it does not preclude the metaphorical aspect. On the contrary, the role of metaphor (and particular metaphors) is essential because if a group is to successfully hegemonize the demands and identities of others it must create analogical relations – forms of resemblance – between such demands, whilst articulating representational forms that can partially fix or condense such demands into a more universal (if ultimately precarious) unity. As I shall argue below, this process often involves the production of empty signifiers that can hold together different demands and identities by successfully drawing frontiers against and excluding others. Here again one particular difference will often begin to assume a more universal function. But this brings us nicely to the second face of hegemony.

## 7. Hegemony as a form of rule or governance

The first face of hegemony discloses the way in which projects and coalition are forged out of disparate demands and identities. Yet any successful coalition or assemblage has to be installed and reproduced. In other words, it needs to win the active or passive consent of subjects, or at least it needs to secure the complicity of a range of social actors to its practices and dispositions. This means that it must offer points of attachment and identification that can grip subjects in particular ways, thus providing benefits and enjoyments that affectively bond them to a certain set of actors, whilst causing them to shun and demonize others. Hegemony as a form of rule speaks in general to the way in which subjects accept and conform to a particular regime, practice, or policy, even though they may have previously resisted or opposed them.<sup>11</sup> Yet the achievement of acceptance, conformity and compliance is a complicated process. Here I want to focus on two related aspects.

The first aspect concerns the way in which grievances and demands are managed in the political and policy process, so that the existing order can be reproduced without direct challenge. It is here that proponents of poststructuralist discourse theory employ the *logic of difference*. The logic of difference involves the loosening-up or disarticulation of equivalential chains of demands and identities via various practices of challenge, institutionalization, deflection, or negation. This logic is marked either by the differential incorporation or even co-optation of claims and demands, where their cutting edge may be blunted, and/or it is accompanied by the pluralizing or opening-up of a regime or practice to new demands and claims, where those in a social field acknowledge and accommodate difference.<sup>12</sup> Policies may thus be devised and implemented to disarm challenges to the *status quo* by addressing some (or all) of the concerns expressed by various groups or subjects, thereby preventing the linking together of demands and dampening their impact. They may also be couched in particular forms of rhetoric that conceal certain aspects of the policy, or deflect attention from their longer-term implications. For example, the various forms of consultation, deliberation and legislation composing a policy of sustainable aviation can thus be understood as one of the means to break-up an anti-aviation coalition, whilst also endeavoring to tackle a wicked policy problem.

In short, the logic of difference speaks to the way in which grievances, demands and problems are channeled and managed by power-holders in ways that do not disturb or modify a dominant practice or regime in a fundamental way. It comprises a complex range of strategies and tactics of government that are imbued with various forms of knowledge and expertise. Conceived of in this way, the logic of difference shares important resonances with what Foucault (1991a) called ‘governmentality’. In this conception, government is an art of doing politics, an activity of governing issues and subjectivities, which concerns the ‘how’ and ‘what’ of public interventions; what Foucault (1982, pp. 220–221) famously termed the ‘conduct of conduct’.<sup>13</sup>

But an even better exercise of power is to prevent demands and grievances from arising at all. As Lukes (2005, p. 27) puts it when discussing his third dimension of power:

A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants. Indeed, is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have – that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires?

This is the most interesting and controversial dimension of Lukes’ theory, which explicitly foregrounds the role of ideology and hegemony in the maintenance of power and domination. Yet as many commentators have correctly shown Lukes relies on the problematic concept of ‘real interests’, which he imputes onto social actors without providing convincing grounds for its adoption and acceptance, and he remains ambivalent between a realist epistemology, which presumes the existence of strong moral grounds with which to evaluate policies and practices, and the resort to a moral relativism, which relies more on a conventionalist epistemology. In short, Lukes and other rationalists such as Habermas seem to rely too heavily on the rational autonomy of an Enlightenment subjectivity that is endowed with the capacity to discern illegitimate exercises of power and to disclose relations of domination.

How then to capture the exercise of power that works to prevent subjects from translating dislocatory experiences into demands and challenges without recourse to a notion of ideology as false consciousness? How are we to think about the organization and shaping of subjective desire without simplistic notions of manipulation and ideological deception,

which rely primarily on epistemological criteria of demarcating truth and falsity? It is here that the Lacanian concept of fantasy can focus our attention on the enjoyment subjects procure from their identifications with certain signifiers and figures, and the way these identifications exclude other identifications and interests (e.g. Glynos 2001, Žižek 1989, 1997, 1998). Of capital importance in this regard is the fact that fantasy is not just an illusion or a form of fake consciousness that comes between a subject and social reality. Instead it structures a subject's 'lived reality' by concealing the radical contingency of social relations, and by naturalizing the various relations of domination within which a subject is enmeshed.<sup>14</sup>

We can start by connecting the category of fantasy to our everyday social practices. Here the role of fantasy is to ensure that the dislocations of everyday life are experienced as an accepted and smooth way of 'going on'. The role of fantasy in this context is not to set up an illusion that provides a subject with a false picture of the world, but to ensure that the radical contingency of social reality remains firmly in the background. But also consider the function of fantasy in relation to the political dimension of social relations. In this context, one can say that the role of fantasy actively suppresses or contains the dimension of challenge and contestation. For example, certain social practices may seek to maintain existing social structures by pre-emptively absorbing dislocations, thus preventing them from becoming the source of a political practice. In fact, the logic of many management and governance techniques could be seen in this light: they seek to displace and deflect potential difficulties or 'troubleshoot' before problems become the source of antagonistic constructions (see Glynos and Howarth 2008a).

But how, if at all, do fantasmatic logics relate to *political practices*? Is it not the case that political practices represent a *rupture* with the logic of fantasy, which has a concealing function? The answer is affirmative. Yet even though antagonisms indicate the limits of a social order by disclosing those points at which 'the impossibility of society' is manifest, they are still forms of social construction, which furnish the subject with a way of positivizing the lack in the structure. This means that while the construction of frontiers presupposes contingency and public contestation it does *not* necessarily entail 'attentiveness' to radical contingency. In other words, radical contingency can be concealed in political practices just as much as it is in social practices. If the function of fantasy in social practices implicitly reinforces the 'natural' character of their elements, or actively prevents the emergence of the political dimension, then we could say that the function of fantasy in political practices is to give them *direction* and *energy* by pointing to things that are desired or rejected (see Glynos and Howarth 2007, pp. 145–152).

Put more fully, then, the logic of fantasy operates by providing a fantasmatic narrative that promises a fullness-to-come once a named or implied obstacle is overcome, and which foretells of disaster if the obstacle proves insurmountable. The first element might be termed the beatific dimension of fantasy and the second the horrific dimension of fantasy, which work hand-in-hand (Stavrakakis 1999, pp. 108–109, 2007). The beatific side, as Žižek (1998, p. 192) puts it, has 'a *stabilizing* dimension, which is governed by the dream of a state without disturbances, out of reach of human depravity', while the horrific aspect possesses 'a *destabilizing* dimension', where the Other – a 'Jewish plot' or the lazy/overzealous immigrant – is presented as a threatening or irritating force that must be rooted out or destroyed. Our subjective desires and identifications are thus sustained by the threats posed to our ideals and dreams.

Consider, for example, a political party or movement that affirms a set of ideals – a free economy, a strong state, and a return to traditional morality – and proposes a set of policies to achieve them: the privatization of nationalized industries and utilities, the deregulation of the economy, measures to bolster law and order, policies to support

conventional families, and so on. But in the same breath it posits and targets a series of dangerous ‘Others’ – ‘welfare scroungers’ that steal from the public purse; ‘illegal immigrants’ that threaten indigenous jobs and contribute disproportionately to levels of crime and disorder; ‘single mothers’ who are unable to care for their families and need to be properly regulated by the state, etc. – that prevent the attainment of its ideals and policies. These fantasmatic objects serve both as an obstacle to the subjects gripped by this discourse – they represent and embody a ‘theft’ of the subject’s ‘enjoyment’ so to speak – but in so doing they thus sustain, organize and channel the desire for the (impossible) ideals and policies they want.

Is this an exercise of power? Yes and no. The creation of a fantasy or myth always involves the logic of inclusion and exclusion – the creation of political frontiers that divide the social – and thus entails the exercise of power. Put more formally: A exercises power over B to the extent that A creates or propagates a fantasy with which B identifies, and the grip of this fantasy precludes other possible identifications, and thus other possible constructions of interest. Both the installation of a fantasy, and the way in which subjects identify with such narratives, are initially contingent possibilities, and they involve decisions and acts that amount to instances and practices of power.

But if and when B identifies with a certain fantasy – when B is *gripped* by a picture that holds it captive (as Wittgenstein once put it) – and it becomes sedimented and naturalized in practices, institutions and images, then it ceases to be a relation of power in the strict sense and becomes instead a relation of domination. Domination, as I shall suggest, thus differs from authority and oppression in that agents are complicit in their acceptance of structures and practices that from the critic’s point of view can be judged illegitimate or unjust. In short, then, the role of ideology *qua* fantasy is to capture the various way subjects organize their enjoyment by binding themselves to particular objects and representations so as ‘to resolve some fundamental antagonism’ and to cover over their lack (Žižek 1997, p. 11). Social fantasies thus organize and shape our desires so that an order, practice or policy may be sustained with little or no challenge. They can thereby function to displace antagonisms and demands, thus enabling the smooth reproduction of a practice or regime.<sup>15</sup>

## 8. Intermezzo: Power, hegemony and policy analysis

In this section, I shall pause to provide a quick sketch of power from a poststructuralist perspective. Following Foucault, power is not ‘a thing’ or a commodity that can be used in an instrumental fashion. Neither is it a capacity or a disposition vested in human beings or institutions. Power is also not synonymous with domination, repression or coercion, although the concept is intimately related to these predicates. As against the rationalist accounts developed by Habermas, Lukes and others, for example, for whom power and domination are external to rational processes of discursive communication, power is not antithetical to practices of freedom. Nor, finally, can power be reduced to structural properties or causal agents.

Put more positively, power is a relational concept that presupposes a certain play in any structure of domination, and thus the interaction of relatively free social agents who are engaged in struggle to impose their wills and objectives on each other. But in this strategic perspective – ‘the conduct of conduct’ to use Foucault’s neat phrase – there is no sovereign Subject; there are only ‘strategies without subjects’ (Foucault 1982, p. 220–221). Power is thus ‘everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere’ (Foucault 1979, p. 93). It is immanent in all kinds of social relations – both

public and private – and it is dispersed throughout the social order. Power is productive and constitutive of identities and social relations.

These are well known propositions. What poststructuralist discourse theory adds is the role of hegemony as a political *practice*, and as a way of conceptualizing different *forms* of rule and their maintenance. The political logics of equivalence and difference enable an analyst to show *how* practices or policies come into being or are transformed. The concept of fantasy provides the means to understand *why* and *how* subjects are gripped by practices and regimes. It concerns the *force* and *passion* of our identifications (Laclau 2005, p. 101). In this way, fantasy contributes to our understanding of the resistance to change of social practices – their ‘inertia’ so to speak – but *also* the speed and direction of change when it does occur: what might be termed the ‘vector’ of political practices (Glynos and Howarth 2007).

Like other practices and social forms, I take power and hegemony to be constitutive of the practices of policy-making. In very general terms, the aim of critical policy studies is to critically explain how and why a particular policy has been formulated and implemented, rather than others. Invariably these processes and practices involve the definition of problems (and thus to some extent solutions), complex practices of deliberation, as well as the taking of decisions; they also involve complicated logics of inclusion and exclusion, and thus the exercise of political power. But policy analysis also has a critical and normative function. How are we to critically evaluate particular public policies and the policy process more generally? What norms and values come into play in policy evaluation and critique, and how are they connected to the tasks of characterization and explanation?

Answers to these questions are usually couched in terms of the relative importance of material interests or ideas, on the one hand, or investigations that emphasize either the determining role of social structures or the causal actions of individual agents on the other. My view is that the hegemony perspective I have outlined can usefully link these aspects together in an anti-essentialist and post-foundational way. More precisely, it offers a dialectical relationship between structure, agency and power; it refashions the relationship between identities and interests; and it provides a way of thinking about identity and subjectivity.

But these ontological and theoretical arguments should not come at the expense of the epistemological and methodological aspects of discursive policy analysis. In exploring the latter, I take discourse theory to be a *problem-driven* approach to political analysis. It thus involves the construction of particular problems in specific historical contexts. Yet post-structuralist discourse theorists do ask some general questions. What are the origins of particular discourses and policies? How can they be characterized? How and why are they sustained? When and how are they changed? And, finally, because poststructuralist discourse theory is a species of critical theory, how can discourses be evaluated and criticized?

## 9. Doing discursive policy analysis: the logics of critical explanation

My response to these questions is captured by the phrase *logics of critical explanation* (Glynos and Howarth 2007). Very schematically, this approach consists of five connected steps. First, following Foucault, it begins by *problematizing* a particular policy, practice or regime. One of the most difficult tasks is thus to construct a set of phenomena as a problem: the way ‘being gives itself to be, necessarily, thought’, as Foucault (1985, p. 11) once put it. This problematization is related both to the field of academic questions, and to the social and political issues that confront us in a specific historical conjuncture (Foucault 1984b). In the field of policy studies, the practice of problematization focuses on the question

of problem-definition in a particular field or domain, the various problematizations of this problematization, and the efforts of an analyst to problematize these problematizations.

Secondly, the *form* of explanation in this approach is retroductive, rather than just inductive or deductive. Borrowing here from the American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce, and philosophers of science such as Norwood Hanson, the explanatory task begins with an anomalous or wondrous phenomenon – which must be constructed as a tractable *explanandum* – that would be rendered intelligible were a putative *explanans* to hold (Hanson 1961, 1972, Peirce 1957). Critical explanation thus proceeds by seeking to render a problematized phenomenon – a particular policy or practice for example – more intelligible. This involves the production of a hypothesis that is tested through a to-and-fro movement with the available empirical data until we are persuaded that the putative *explanans* clears away the confusion and properly fits the phenomenon under consideration.

But it also tested by the tribunal of critical scholars who can evaluate the publicly available explanations and critiques of particular phenomena. And though their acceptance does not guarantee the validity of a proto-explanation in any simple fashion, these dialogical and discursive practices are vital in determining what is to *count* as ‘a candidate for truth and falsity’ (to use Foucault’s phrase), and are thus central to their being accepted as explanations. Even more challengingly, perhaps, a further tribunal of critics consists of those practitioners and policy-makers who may act and reflect on the insights and explanations offered by empirical and historical research. In fact, by combining both sets of tribunals, we make possible a form of critical policy studies that is not only interpretative and explanatory, but constitutes ‘a specific genre of critique or critical attitude toward ways of being governed in the present – an attitude of testing and possible transformation’ (Tully 2002, p. 534).

Thirdly, the *content* of any putative *explanans* in this perspective is couched in terms of logics, rather than laws, causal mechanisms, or contextual self-interpretations. But I need to say a little more about this. Logics in my view are not causal laws or causal mechanisms, which are independent of an actor’s meaning. Yet while their discernment must take actors’ own meanings into account, they do not simply reflect an actor’s self-interpretations. Instead, the logic of a discourse captures the *rules* that govern a meaningful practice, as well as the *conditions* that make the operation of such rules possible, whilst at the same time rendering them vulnerable to change. Logics thus provide answers to questions about the nature and function of various social practices, as well as their overall purposes, meanings and effects.

It is possible to identify three types of logic in poststructuralist discourse theory. *Social logics* enable one to *characterize* social practices in different contexts by discerning the rules and norms that structure or govern them. These rules and norms are not external to these practices, nor do they determine or exhaust each and every articulatory practice; they are heuristic devices that enable the researcher to work out what is going-on in a particular situation. Social logics are thus multiple, contextual, and incomplete: there are as many contingent logics as the various situations that an investigator explores. They may capture economic, social, cultural and political processes: a particular logic of competition or commodification, for example, or a specific logic of bureaucratization in a particular social context. ‘Enforced ethnic and racial separation for political domination and economic exploitation’, for example, is a stylized way of characterizing the logic of apartheid discourse in South Africa.

*Political logics* enable the researcher to explain and potentially criticize the emergence and formation of a social practice or regime. As I have suggested, of particular importance in this regard are the complex and intersecting logics of equivalence and difference. These

logics speak to the different ways in which social relations are challenged and structured. Politics is thus understood as the contestation and institution of social relations and practices. Focusing on the political dimension of social relations enables the analyst to disclose and render visible the contingent character of any practice, policy or institution by showing the role of power and exclusion in its formation.

It is no coincidence that the concept of political logics is intimately related to Foucault's method of genealogy. The practice of genealogy enabled Foucault to chart the complex lines of descent and emergence in the formation of an identity or a rule, and to disclose alternative paths and possibilities. Political logics endeavor to formalize these intuitions and tactics. For example, the emergence, formation, and maintenance of the apartheid regime in South Africa involved the linking together of different demands and antagonisms into a new hegemonic project that contested the dominant policy discourse of 'segregation'. It constituted one available and credible discourse that addressed Afrikaner workers, farmers, capitalists, and intellectuals in the dislocatory conditions of the 1930s and 1940s. The set of institutions and policies that emerged after 1948 was maintained by a series of political practices, including coercion, cooptation, management of antagonisms, and so forth.

*Fantasmatic logics* provide the means to explain and potentially criticize the way subjects are gripped by discourses. The logic of fantasy helps to locate and unpick the ideological dimension of social relations, where the concept of ideology is understood as the logic of concealing the contingency of social relations and naturalizing the relations of domination in discourses or meaningful practices. An important focus in this regard is on the production of certain fantasmatic narratives, which structure the way different social subjects are attached to certain signifiers, and on the different types of 'enjoyment' subjects procure in identifying with discourses and believing things they do.

Yet any putative *explanans* will comprise a plurality of logics – social, political and fantasmatic – which will have to be linked together in relation to a particular set of circumstances in order to render a problematic phenomenon intelligible. And it is here, fourthly, that I stress the concept of *articulation*, as a practice of linking together elements in a logic that modifies each particular element, and results in a synthesis comprising 'a rich totality of many determinations and relations' (Marx 1973, p. 100). Moreover, in order to think about this practice of articulation, we stress the role of judgment as a kind of *situated ability*, in which a subject – a researching subject in our particular case – acquires and enacts the capacity to connect a concept to an object, or 'apply' a logic to a series of social processes, within a contingent and contestable theoretical framework.<sup>16</sup>

## 10. Critical policy analysis? Ethico-political critique and normative evaluation

I have touched upon the way our approach presumes and discloses the radical contingency of social relations, while providing a grammar of concepts to interpret the various ontical responses to it. But what are the implications for ethics and normativity? Where is the *critical* dimension of critical explanation? In addressing these questions, I turn to the fifth and final step in the approach advocated here.

Let us begin by recalling that social logics enable us to *characterize* the rules and norms of a practice or regime, whilst political logics can help us to show other possibilities of social organization when the 'ignoble origins' of rules and norms are reactivated, contested and instituted. Fantasmatic logics, by contrast, disclose a particular *way* in which subjects identify and are gripped by a discourse, though this is only one mode of identifying, and they enable us to detect particular narratives that provide ideological closure for

the subject. These maneuvers enable the analyst to begin the task of critically explaining practices and regimes.

Yet we should surely go beyond the strategy of simply inverting social hierarchies and binary oppositions, so as to project more ‘positive ontopolitical presumptions’. But how is this possible, and under what conditions? I shall briefly address these questions by first focusing on those social practices in which subjects are absorbed in their ongoing and routinized activities. Though the social dimension of a practice or regime predominates, we can still assume that the constitution of every identity, practice or regime involves a moment of political exclusion, and thus power, and that every relatively settled set of social relations involves some form of hierarchy.

However, there are at least three related ways of complexifying this picture of a social practice: the relations of subordination, domination, and oppression (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, pp. 153–154). Relations of subordination point to those *practices which do not invite or need the public contestation of social norms*, either by the subjects engaged in the practice or by the theorist who is interpreting the practice. Existing social relations are reproduced in this mode without public contestation, as dislocations are covered over in the name of legitimate exercises of power or authority. Here we might include everyday practices such as working, leisure activities, playing sport, and so forth. All these activities may in fact involve and rely upon relations of subordination, but they are not *experienced* as dominating or oppressive, nor are they regarded as unjust by the analyst.

Relations of domination, by contrast, provide the conceptual means for an analyst to claim that a subject is dominated, though the norms so judged are not explicitly challenged by those absorbed in the practice. Here interpretation may focus on those *practices which appear to actively prevent the public contestation of social norms from arising in the first place*. This may be because social relations are reproduced without public contestation, either because dislocatory experiences are processed privately or informally, or because they do not arise at all. For example, grievances or protest may take the form of ‘horizontal voice’, in which employees or citizens grumble amongst themselves, rather than addressing or confronting their managers or governors. Indeed, even if they are voiced vertically so to speak, those in power may successfully displace or accommodate the grievances and demands (Hirschman 1970, O’Donnell 1986). On the other hand, the concealing of dislocation will be accomplished most completely and effectively if subjects are rendered ideologically complicit in the practices they partake.

Finally, relations of oppression indicate those features of a practice, policy or regime that are challenged by subjects in the name of a principle or ideal allegedly denied or violated by the social practice itself. Here the experiences of dislocation are symbolized in terms of a questioning of norms, which may be accompanied by political challenges to the practices or regime of practice examined. But equally they may be met with renewed efforts to offset challenges and maintain the existing social relations, which can be captured with the logic of difference in its various manifestations.

Characterizing practices as fostering or reinforcing relations of domination immediately highlights the sociological and normative character of the approach advocated here. After all, the very identification of a social norm as *worthy* of public contestation, as well as the claim that a norm is actively prevented from being contested, presupposes some view of social domination. It implies that we already have some grasp of the practice, both sociologically and normatively. And this is where *social logics* are particularly relevant: they are critical in making explicit the sociological and normative aspects of this process of characterization. In this context, to highlight the *political* dimension of a practice entails pointing to those *aspects of a practice which seek to generate, maintain, contain,*

or resolve the public contestation of social norms. Put differently, the political aspects of a practice involve attempts to challenge and replace existing social structures, as well as attempts to neutralize such challenges in a transformist way (Gramsci 1971, pp. 58–59).

But what, then, can we say about ethical critique and normative evaluation? It is clear that the focus on radical contingency is connected to the practice of critique, as this focus can disclose points of social contestation and moments of possible reversal. Yet it is also important to distinguish between ethics and our grounds for normative evaluation. Ethics in our perspective involves an acknowledgment of the radical contingency of social existence – the lack inherent in any order of being – and a particular way of responding to ‘its’ demands: an *ethos* that faces up to the fact that each of us is necessarily marked by our identifications with an object that fills the lack, and which defines *who* we are and *what* we stand for.<sup>17</sup>

Consider, for example, a subject in a modern state, who has multiple identities and subject positions: a citizen, mother, Muslim, English, and so forth. She might identify with a particular faith, or with the constitutional principles and ideals of the modern democratic state – or both – but identify she does. Yet *how* we relate to ‘our Thing’ will be vital for *how* we relate to others, and their identifications. Indeed, in this conception, our relation to others presupposes an acknowledgement and complex *negotiation* with the ideals and objects that makes us the subjects we are: a mix of attentiveness, investment *and* release-ment. In other words, an ethics of ‘failed transcendence’ that adds a further twist to an ethics of abundance and radical immanence (Howarth 2006).

This means that ethical critique is directly connected to the fundamental commitments of one’s social ontology, where it demands detailed analyses of the kinds of fantasies that underpin a given set of social and political practices, as well as explorations of the ways in which fantasmatic objects can be destabilized or modulated. By contrast, questions of normativity are directed at the concrete relations of domination in which subjects are positioned. Normative questions thus require the analyst to characterize those relations that are perceived to be oppressive or unfair in the name of alternative values or principles.

Two elements come into play here. First, there are the values that are brought to any interpretation by the theorist – in my case, for example, the values associated with the project of radical democracy – as well as the accompanying tasks of continually clarifying, justifying and modifying them. Secondly, there is the task of pinpointing and remaining attentive to those new values and identities encountered in the practices interpreted: what we might deem the ‘counter-logics’ of social domination and oppression. These counter-logics, which may amount to little more than ‘marginal practices’ that are not subsumed by relations of domination, must themselves be evaluated in terms of their own internal standards and in terms of our contestable values and ideals. Yet they may in turn lead us to revise the normative grounds of our judgments and justifications.

Finally, it is important to stress that we concede a lexical priority to the ethical vis-à-vis the normative. This arises because of the primacy we accord to radical contingency in our social ontology, but it also stems also from the belief that our normative stances are themselves ultimately contingent. In other words, the norms and ideals that we project into our objects of study are intrinsically contestable and revisable. Contingency necessarily penetrates the realm of normativity, which in turn indicates the need to develop a suitable *ethos* for conducting research.

In short, what might be called a practice of *ethico-political interpretation* in the field of policy analysis shares important family resemblances with William Connolly’s method of ‘*ontopolitical interpretation*’ (Connolly 1995).<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, its task is to reactivate those options that were foreclosed during the emergence of a practice or policy – the clashes and forces which are repressed or defeated – in order to show how present

practices rely upon exclusions that reveal the non-necessary character of existing social formations, and to explore the consequences and potential effects of such ‘repressions’. On the other hand, in the mode of what one could call an *onto-ethical* critique, its task is to critically interrogate the conditions under which a subject is gripped by a particular social practice *despite* its non-necessary character. This mode of critique furnishes us with a means of critically interrogating the will to (fantasmatic) closure. Both modes of critique are informed by an ethos of exercising a fidelity to contingency itself, and they function by displaying other possibilities for political decision and identification, as well as other modalities of identification. Together they contribute to a practice of *ethico-political interpretation* that articulates explanation, critique, and normative evaluation in the field of policy studies.

## 11. Conclusion

In a highly condensed, yet suggestive phrase Ernesto Laclau (1993, p. 546) has asserted that power can be understood as ‘the trace of contingency within the structure’. The statement is somewhat enigmatic and open to differing interpretations. However, I shall take it to mean that all social structures and forms, including policies and policy regimes, are the product of political decisions, and though these acts of power are often forgotten and sedimented, they leave institutions, relations and policies vulnerable to reactivation and contestation. When integrated with social, political and fantasmatic logics, the ‘trace of contingency’ can help us to critically explain practices, regimes, and policies. We can thus chart their character, emergence, institution and grip in different contexts. But equally if we are attentive to radical contingency and its potentials we might also develop the means to cultivate a democratic and libertarian ethos through which the constitutive role of power and antagonism can be negotiated in new and productive ways. As Foucault (1982, p. 222) suggested, we could then speak of ‘an agonism – of a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle; less of a face to face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation’.

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## Notes

1. Rorty's comments were not idiosyncratic or off-the-cuff remarks designed to rebuff his critics; on the contrary, they reflect the general thrust of his (political) philosophy, which has sought to deflate metaphysical pretension and develop concepts at a more concrete level of abstraction (see Rorty 1996, pp. 69–76).
2. This literature is vast and growing. A cursory glance at current debates in academic disciplines as diverse as social psychology, history, anthropology, linguistics, sociology, international relations, cultural studies and literary criticism shows a proliferation of studies that deploy the concept of discourse and the methods of discourse analysis. Moreover, there has been a spate of new journals, handbooks and textbooks devoted entirely to the development and application of discourse theory and analysis in the social sciences. See, for example, Billig 1997a, 1997b, Burman and Parker 1993, Campbell 1992, 1998, van Dijk 1985, 1997, George 1994, Fischer 2000, 2003, Fischer and Forrester 2003, Gottweis 2002, 2006, Hajer 1995, 2009, Hajer and Wagenaar 2003, P. Hall 1998, S. Hall 1997, Howarth 2000, Macdonnell 1986, Milliken 1999, Mills 1997, Munslow 1992, Potter and Wetherell 1987, 1995, White 1978, Williams 1999, Wodak 2005, Wodak and Meyer 2001, 2009, Wodak and Krzyzanowski 2008. Journals devoted solely to the analysis of discourse include *Critical Discourse Studies*, *Discourse and Society*, *Discourse Studies*, and *Discourse Processes*.
3. Here the work of linguistic theorists like Louis Hjelmslev (1963) are of particular importance, as their radical formalization of the Saussurean model of language rids the later of any substance.
4. Derrida discusses the logic of supplementarity in various texts. For example, in his deconstructive readings of Saussure and Levi-Strauss, Derrida questions the concept of totality or system in the name of an 'impossibility' that always exceeds any particular structure. However, his notion of impossibility is not based on an empirical richness of phenomena that cannot be captured by any finite structure, but is 'grounded' on a 'play' that is an ontological feature of *any* meaningful system or structure. And his concept of 'play' is derived in part from his reworking of the sign: 'If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infinity of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field – that is, language and a finite language – excludes totalization. This field is in fact that of *play* – that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble. This field permits these infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because instead of being an inexhaustible field, as in the classical hypothesis, instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a centre which arrests and founds the play of substitutions. One could say – rigorously using that word whose scandalous signification is always obliterated in French – that this movement of the play, permitted by the lack, the absence of a centre or origin, is the movement of *supplementarity*. One cannot determine the centre, the sign which *supplements* it, which takes its place in its absence – this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a *supplement*. The movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified' (Derrida 1978, p. 289).
5. Structural undecidability is clearly evident in the field of *political* representation, where representatives do not simply transmit already existing interests or fully fledged demands, but can always modify – and often constitute – that which they represent. This play means that power and freedom operates in the very structure of political representation itself.
6. These ideas are developed in Glynos and Howarth (2008b) and Howarth (2000).
7. To illustrate his point, Foucault introduces a paradigmatic case of domination: '[I]n the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we cannot say there was only male power; the woman herself could do a lot of things: be unfaithful to him, extract money from him, refuse him sexually. She was, however, subject to a state of domination, in the measure where [there were] no more than a certain number of tricks which never brought about a reversal of the situation' (Foucault 1991b, p. 12).
8. Foucault's later writings have also spawned a new way of thinking of government as an art of doing politics – an activity of governing issues and subjectivities – which concerns the 'how' and 'what' of public interventions: what Foucault famously termed the 'conduct of conduct'. Government thus concerns the whole range of practices and activities that are undertaken by various agencies in order to shape the conduct of citizens and subjects. In this perspective, government is best viewed as a plethora of heterogeneous and ambiguous authorities, with diverse

technologies, rationalities, discourses, and modes of intervention. Indeed, its very unity as a system of institutions – such that exists – is itself a political and ideological construction. He also developed a novel form of critique, which focused on the exposure of limits and their possible transgression (see Foucault 1984a).

9. This implication follows from the ontological presuppositions of poststructuralist discourse theory, namely, the fact that any social relation or formation is not fixed or closed in any ultimate way. Instead, the partial fixation of meanings involves the articulation of ‘floating signifiers’ or elements into nodal points that temporarily stem the flow of meanings and differences (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 112.)
10. Dahl’s focus on observable behaviour emerged, first, as a critique of elitist studies of power (e.g. Hunter 1953, Mills 1959), in which it was claimed that power is possessed by a restricted set of power brokers, rather than being distributed in a pluralistic fashion. Dahl’s study of local power in New Haven, Connecticut, thus sought to show that many groups, and not just elites, won key decisions and thus possessed power (Dahl 1961). But Dahl’s interest was also methodological, because he wanted to develop a legitimate model of scientific endeavor that relied less on philosophical and metaphysical assumptions, and more on the careful analysis of observable behavior under rigorous scientific conditions. His work is thus located in the positivist tradition of research, in which theory is employed both to interpret empirical events, and to evaluate the plausibility of putative theories. This conception of theory differs from the conception advanced here.
11. Yet hegemony in this sense still admits of variation. Two opposed ideal types can be specified. On the one hand, what we might term a situation of ‘organic hegemony’ represents a type of rule in which subjects actively consent to a particular practice or regime, so that the role of force or domination recedes into the background. On the other hand, at the opposite pole of the continuum, we find a situation of ‘inorganic hegemony’, which designates a practice or regime where subjects at best comply with, or even actively resist, such forms so that relations of force, coercion, and compulsion are necessary to secure an order.
12. However, it is important to stress that there is no *a priori* privileging of equivalence or difference on critical or evaluative grounds. The two logics are no more than regulative ideals, where equivalence involves the logic of combination and difference a logic of substitution in which there is little or no equivalence between demands. Thus there is no way of saying that equivalence is normatively preferred over difference, as the critical and normative implications of these logics are strictly contextual and perspectival. As I shall argue below, our normative evaluation of a particular strategy or movement depends on the particular circumstances and conditions under consideration, where it is quite possible that a pluralizing form of political engagement or even an incorporating strategy is preferable to a more equivalential form. Indeed, it is quite possible for political projects to engage in both logics at the same time, or to combine these different logics in a single campaign, though this requires great political skill and ingenuity. The empirical implications of these remarks are explored in Griggs and Howarth (2008). The normative aspects are highlighted and developed in Norval (2007).
13. Here the question of government is not just about intractable questions of sovereignty and legitimacy, of constitutional settlements and rules, or formal decision-making procedures and outcomes; nor is government (or the state) simply an instrument of class domination or ideological mystification, or synonymous with different logics of capture and cooptation. In equal fashion, government is not a neutral public arena where ‘major group conflicts are debated and resolved’, or a neutral weathervane that merely registers and reflects the different pressures and forces of society (Connolly 1969, p. 8). Instead, following Mitchell Dean (1999) and Nicholas Rose (1999), it concerns the whole range of practices and activities that are undertaken by various agencies and authorities in order to shape the conduct of citizens and subjects.
14. Indeed, the ‘success’ of a fantasy is sometimes ‘evident’ its invisibility: the fact that it supports social reality without our being conscious of it. By contrast, the visibility of fantasmatic figures and devices – their appearance *as* fantasies – means that they cease to function properly in this regard. The underlying frame that structures enjoyment and identity thus becomes manifest and open to challenge.
15. The role of ideology *qua* fantasy thus serves to reinforce a practice or regime by concealing contingency and naturalizing domination. But it also adds an important dimension in the making and breaking of coalitions more generally. I have suggested that notions like rhetorical re-description provide tools for analyzing the way subjects are persuaded to support particular

coalitions and projects. But as it stands this notion is still too cognitive and rational, for it does not speak to the way in which subjects are gripped by particular devices or signifiers, or indeed where they may not be. An adequate approach to rhetorical political analysis must also take into consideration the unconscious and affective investments of subjects in certain rhetorical devices, signifiers, and images. For example, in South Africa during the 1930s Afrikaner nationalists promised the ideal of a pure communitarian identity, which was opposed to British imperialism and African nationalism. But in articulating this discourse it posited a series of Others – the figure of ‘Hoggenheimer’: a Jewish imperialist mineowner who ruthlessly exploited and cheated Afrikaner workers, and a so called ‘Swaart Gevaar’ (a ‘black danger’) that threatened to swamp the Afrikaner people – who were deemed responsible for preventing the attainment of Afrikaner identity, and who stole the Afrikaner’s enjoyment. This fantasy of ethno-nationalist homogeneity threatened by ethnic and racial difference was of course to lay the basis for the policy of apartheid and separate development in the 1940s and 1950s, and was to provide points of subjective attachment to Afrikaner workers, farmers, businessmen, and urban elites.

16. For instance, how do we know what counts in social reality as a floating or empty signifier, or a dislocation? Or how do we identify the operation of a political or fantasmatic logic? As against the naturalist tendency to subsume, we favor an approach based on intuition, theoretical expertise, and the practice of articulation. This means that having immersed oneself in a given discursive field consisting of texts, documents, interviews, and social practices, the researcher draws on her or his theoretical expertise to make particular *judgments* as to whether something counts as an ‘x’, and must then decide upon its overall import for the problem investigated. The aforementioned theoretical expertise is acquired by the practice of learning and using the specific language games that constitute the grammar of the researcher’s theoretical approach. (Indeed, as we shall suggest, it is precisely in the concrete investigation of particular cases that we acquire such expertise.) An integral part of judging whether a particular empirical phenomenon counts as an instance of ‘x’ consists in deciding what the precise relevance and importance of ‘x’ is in constructing a narrative that explains a phenomenon. These concepts – intuitions, theoretical expertise, judgments, and so forth – are internal components of what we call the practice of articulation, namely, the practice which links specific theoretical and empirical elements together so as to account for a problematized phenomenon (see also Glynos and Howarth 2007).
17. The background for this starting-point in thinking about ethics is elaborated in different ways in Visker (1999) and Žižek (1989, 1990). Some of these points are elaborated in Glynos and Howarth (2007).
18. I have compared Connolly’s arguments and poststructuralist discourse theory in greater detail in Howarth (2008).

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