

## Laclauian discourse theory and the problems of institutions

Hansen, Allan Dreyer

*Publication date:*  
2008

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Hansen, A. D. (2008). *Laclauian discourse theory and the problems of institutions*. Paper presented at Second Global International Studies Conference, Ljubljana, Slovenia.

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [rucforsk@ruc.dk](mailto:rucforsk@ruc.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

***Laclauian discourse theory and the problems of institutions***

Allan Dreyer Hansen

Roskilde University,  
Dept. of Society and Globalisation  
[adh@ruc.dk](mailto:adh@ruc.dk)

Paper to be presented at  
WISC

Second Global International Studies Conference

Ljubljana 23. - 26. July 2008

Panel on

***Institutionalising Discourse***

Draft - please don't quote without permission

## **Abstract:**

Laclauian discourse theory, as well as its main source of inspiration, deconstruction, aims to underline change, instability, process. If the theoretical “foundation” can be put to a single line, it would be the affirmation of un-limitability of the productivity of a signifying chain. However, as both Laclau and Derrida have pointed out several times, dissemination only takes place on the background of some kind of stability, some kind of fixity. The question is how to conceive of this fixity or reproduction.

Within social science one traditional answer has been to affirm institutions as some sort of middle layer between (social) structure and agency. Discourse theory offers a conceptualisation where institutions are conceived of as *a moment* or *a logic* working at the same time as destabilising or de-institutionalising moments or logics. The prime concept in Laclau’s discourse theory for thinking fixations and stabilisations is (a reinterpretation of the Husserlian concept of) sedimentation, to be distinguished from re-activation. The move from a dichotomy to the simultaneous working of contradictory logics of de- and institutionalisation is un-objectable.

However, since the first formulation of the theory in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* there has been two problems. First, due to the thesis of the *ontological primacy of the political* The logic of de-institutionalisation has been thought of as the logic of the Political. Second, the logic of the institutionalised has been thought through the concept of ‘the logic of difference’, distinguished from the ‘logic of equivalence’.

I argue that the only viable solution is a detachment of the distinction between equivalence and difference from the distinction between the political/ re-activation and social/ sedimentation. Actually, one has to reject the thesis in the theory of the 'primacy of the political', and realise that political articulations of demands involves both 'differential' as well as 'equivalental' logics. We have to conceive of politics as yet another social logic, involving both moments of institutions and reactivations.

## ***Introduction:***

In this paper I shall take a closer look at the challenges institutionalism might bring to discourse theory. When referring to discourse theory I focus on the writings of Ernesto Laclau, rather than e.g. Foucault or Fairclough. I believe that Laclau's generalisation of the concept of discourse – that is cancelling the distinction between the discursive and the 'non-discursive' - making it overlap with the social as such is un-objectable. The quite recurrent critique of Laclau's work of having 'over emphasised' the moment of fluidity on the expense of stability, or on voluntarism on the cost of determinism is misplaced. The notion of discourse and especially the concept of articulation is exactly a way of theoretically integrating the two contradictory principles of change and reproduction that has always haunted social theory. However, if Laclau's basic concepts of discourse, articulation, etc. do indeed point in a very fruitful direction, his theory cannot be accepted in its totality. As I will show, the thesis of the ontological primacy of the political must be rejected. This forces us to rethink the relationship between the institutionalised and the changing, which in Laclau is thought of as the relationship between the political and the social. In opposition to this I claim politics is also a social – i.e. an institutionalised – logic. But my main focus in this paper is on the distinction in Laclau between the logic of difference and of equivalence. In continuation of the basic distinction between the political and the social, Laclau claims that logics of difference are the moment of the social – institutional – whereas equivalence is the moment of disruption, of newness, i.e. change and the political. Going back to structural linguistics, I show why this cannot be the case, and point out how we need to rethink the notions of logic and of 'the axes' of discourse.

## ***From structures to logics and subject positions to subject as lack***

Laclau's theory of discourse is based on a generalisation of the discursive. Opposed to thinkers such as Norman Fairclough (Fairclough 1989; Fairclough 1992) or Michel Foucault (Foucault 1974), Laclau insists that it is not possible to maintain a distinction between the discursive and the non-discursive. In a crucial passage, Laclau (and Mouffe) has pointed out, why the notions of institutions cannot be seen as “non-discursive” as is the case in Foucault. Commenting on Foucault's analysis of medical discourse, they point out that:

“If the so-called non-discursive complexes – institutions, techniques, productive organizations, and so on – are analysed, we will only find more or less complex forms of differential positions among objects, which do not arise from a necessity external to the system structuring them and

which can therefore only be conceived as discursive articulations... the identity of the articulated elements must be at least partially modified by the articulation” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 107)

What makes an object an discursive being, is the absence of external necessity and the presence of an internal moment of *articulation*. Articulation is defined as a linking of objects in ways which firstly, *modifies* their identity and second, can not be referred back to deeper necessities (HSS: 105) . As is probably well known, to Laclau (and Mouffe) the discursive extends well beyond mere speech and writing, including all meaningfulness. The identity of physical objects is also modified (formed) as a result of specific 'differential positioning', i.e. discursive articulations. Institutions can not, therefore, be thought of as non-discursive.

As Laclau has often pointed out, granting the discursive a constitutive status is a consequence of taking Derrida's deconstruction serious. In a nut shell, what Derrida has pointed out is the essential possibility of the drifting of meaning, or in other words, the constitutive impossibility of a final limiting of the productivity of a signifying chain. Any practice of articulation, i.e. any modification of the identity of objects has as its condition of possibility, the presence of non-fixed potential meanings (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 105f).

The focus on vulnerability, of the final impossibility of 'ultimate closure', has led several commentators to claim that the theory of discourse lacks a notion of fixity, or of institutions. In order to establish this argument let's take a closer look at the debate between Nicos Mouzelis and Laclau. Mouzelis claims that Laclau and Mouffe, “because of their excessive fear of reifying institutional structures, go to the other extreme and analyse practices in an institutional vacuum” (Mouzelis 1988). He claims that one needs not – as has Laclau and Mouffe done – to move into a Post-Marxist position, since “Marxism, more than any other paradigm in the social sciences, can suggest very fruitful ways of studying social formations from the point of view of both agency and institutional structure, both as a configuration of collective actors struggling over the control of scarce resources, and as a systemic whole whose institutionalized parts or ‘subsystems’ can be more or less compatible or incompatible with each other. Thus, contrary to Laclau and Mouffe’s post-structuralist approach or to action-oriented sociological theories (symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, exchange theory, conflict theory), *subjects or agents in Marxist theory do not operate in an institutional vacuum*. Rather, their strategies or practices have to be seen within specific structural constraints, within institutional ensembles of whose (often incompatible) organizing principles agents may or may not be aware.” (ibid).

Laclau has answered this criticism in a convincing way. He points out that Mouzelis does not really offer a logical articulation of the two principles of institutions and agency (Laclau 1990:

221). Laclau answers:

“It is completely untrue that we have ever stated that social practises take place in an institutional vacuum. Indeed, institutions are fully present in our approach: they are what we have called *systems of differences*. ... We have asserted that social agents are *partially* internal to the institutions, thus forcing both the notion of 'agency' and 'institution' to be deconstructed. Regarding agency, our conception of the decentred subject means that there is a plurality of subject positions – or differential positions – which are thus internal to institutions. ... On the other hand, the agents are not just blind instruments or bearers of structures for the simple reason that the latter do not constitute a closed system, but are riven with antagonisms, threatened by a constitutive outside and merely have a weak or relative form of integration. All this requires constant acts of recreation of the institutional complexes by the agents: that is what constitutes the practice of articulation. It is not the practice of subjects constituted outside of any system of differences (institutions), but of subjects constituted by those differences and the fissures or gaps they reveal.” (ibid: 223)

He can therefore sum up his theoretical conception of the problem of institutions in the following manner:

“In opposition to the postulation of two *separate* metaphysical entities – agents and structures – we suggest the following: (a) that there are merely relative *degrees* of institutionalisation of the social, which penetrate and define the subjectivity of the agents themselves; and (b) that the institutions do not constitute closed structural frameworks, but loosely integrated complexes requiring the constant intervention of articulatory practices.” (ibid: 223-4).

### ***Logical articulation of the problem of 'structure vs. agency'***

My claim is that Laclau's discourse theory, and particular the concept of articulation provide a theoretically promising – i.e. coherent – way of approaching the tricky question of institutions. As Laclau points out: “By articulation we understand the creation of something new out of a dispersion of elements. If society had an ultimate objectivity, then social practises, even the most innovative ones, would be essentially repetitive: they would only be the explicitation or reiteration of something that was already there from the beginning. ... But if contingency penetrates all identity and consequently limits all objectivity, in that case there is no 'objectivity' that may constitute an 'origin': the moment of creation is radical – *creatio ex nihilo* – and no social practice, not even the most humble acts of our everyday life, are entirely repetitive.

'Articulation' in that sense, is the primary ontological level of the constitution of the real” (Laclau 1990: 183-4)

That is to say, in stead of a dualistic vision of social relations connecting two positive entities, “agents” and “structures”, what we have are *relative degrees* of institutionalisations. The higher degree of institutionalisation, the more *repetition* dominates, the lesser the degree of institutionalisation, the more – and the more radical – acts of articulation are needed. All this, I believe, is well articulated in Laclau, through his notions of discourses and their (minor or major) dislocations, the way discourses distributes *subject positions*, which however must be supplemented by a (Lacanian) subject (of the lack) 'before' or 'beyond' mere positioning. That is a subject which is external to the positivity of the structure/ institutions, capable of *acting*. Referring to Derrida's deconstruction Laclau in an elegant formulation defines the subject (before the positioning) as *the distance between the decision and the undecidability of the structure* (ibid: 31f).

The fact that no structure is able to close itself, and become strictly determining, is probably the intuition behind much institutionalism, old or new. It can be argued that institutionalism view institutions as conditioning behaviour rather than determining it (e.g. March and Olsen 1989). What Laclau contributes is a form of general theoretisation suggesting ways out of the dualistic pitfalls haunting most institutionalism, which often re-introduces “individuals” in order to make things happen beyond pure determinism. By introducing a subject of a lack, as a *distance* rather than as another positivity, and through the concepts of re-articulations of dislocated structures which can sediment (that is, institutionalise), Laclau has come up with a very challenging and productive way of conceiving of the old problem of reproduction and change in social science. As he suggests in a quote above, one should speak of (degrees of) institutionalisations rather than of institutions.

The way the theory grasps this 'processual' view is through the concept of *logics*. By logic is not meant conceptual logic (the principle of non-contradiction), but rather a specific forming of social relations and entities. One can say, that with discourse theory a *topography* of society (for example the idea of three levels, or base-superstructure) becomes impossible, and is replaced by logics: “all of them are contingent *social logics*, which, as such, acquire their meaning in precise conjunctural and relational contexts, where they always will be limited by other – frequently contradictory – logics; but none of them has absolute validity, in the sense of defining a space or structural moment which could not in its turn be subverted” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 142-3; cf. Laclau 2000; Glynos and Howarth 2007).

I find the basic architecture of the theory quite convincing. However, regarding institutionalisations there are two major problems in Laclau's writings. The first is that politics is considered not as a specific social logic (next to other social logics), but as the logic which both de-institutionalises and re-institutionalises, that is, is considered to have a privileged ontological status. The second is that Laclau in the distinction between difference and equivalence ends up placing sedimentation/ institutionalisation on only one of the two basic axes of discourse (equivalence). As I will show this is an error, and we need to reconsider the two logics (of contiguity and of 'substitutability') as simultaneous present in any form of sedimentation/ institutionalisation.

### ***Equivalence – difference: rupture – sedimentation?***

The concepts of equivalence and difference take up quite a central space in Laclau's theory. They are introduced as ways of making distinction between different types of political projects.

Equivalence means that the singular demand ceases to “be what it is”, a specific demand, and comes to represent something more, typically the demand of overthrowing a repressive regime. Populism is the “ideal type” of equivalential politics, and the attempt of separating the social space into two antagonistic camps – into two chains of equivalences – is its 'ideal type'.

Difference is the logic behind political movements which seeks to heal the social space, giving room to all social demands, treating them 'differently', next to each other, without collapsing them into an equivalential chain (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 129).

However as we seen in the quote above, Laclau also assigns the logic of sedimentation/ institutionalisation to the logic (or rather systems) of difference. Laclau explains:

“I have tried to distinguish, in the logics constitutive of the social, two kinds of operation: the logic of difference, which institutes *particular* locations within a social spectrum; and the logic of equivalence, which 'universalizes' a certain particularity on the basis of its substitutability with an indefinite number of other particularities – the distinction broadly corresponds, in linguistics to that between relations of combination and substitution, or between the syntagmatic and paradigmatic poles. In a populist discourse, for instance, the social space tends to be dichotomized ... [and] establishing between themselves an equivalential relation of substitution,



while an institutional discourse multiplies the differential-syntagmatic positions and, as a result, reduces the equivalential movements that are possible within a certain social formation” (Laclau 2000: 192-3).

Laclau even underlines that in his approach “‘difference’ means *positive* identity, while all antagonistic reordering of the political space is linked to the category of equivalence” (ibid: 193).

Now, Laclau's attempt at thinking institutions as institutionalisations, i.e. as a logic rather than as a fully fledged object, simply present next to other objects (some of them 'individuals') is to be fully endorsed. However, I think there is a problem in identifying the logic of sedimentation/ institutions with the logic of syntagmatic contiguity (of linguistics). Rather, I would claim that institutionalisation is linked to *repetition* (as Laclau himself suggests, when he notes that “if contingency penetrates all identity and consequently limits all objectivity, in that case ... no social practice, not even the most humble acts of our everyday life, are entirely repetitive” (Laclau 1990: 183-4)).

A very obvious place to look for a useful concept of repetition for discourse theory is in Derrida's deconstruction. It appears here as one of the 'infrastructures' constituting the deconstructive chain of (non-)concepts (Gasché 1986) in Derrida's notion of iterability.

To Derrida there can no such thing as a pure repetition, and iterability is Derrida's notion of the condition of possibility as well as the *impossibility* of repetition. Iterability highlights the fact that any repetition is at *the same time* identity and change: Iterability is *both* the origin of iteration or repetition *and* of alteration: “As a result of the difference inscribed in each ideal unit as the possibility of its iteration, that unit is always already something other than it purports to be” (Gasché 1986: 215).

The way Gasché describes iterability gives us a hint that Laclau's argument has conflated contiguity for repetition: “... a repetition becomes possible only if a unit that is both sufficiently similar and sufficiently different to occupy the place of another comes to fill in the lack created by its absence. At that moment, the supplementing unit both repeats the absent unit and becomes an alterity that takes its place” (Gasché 1986: 213).

In this quote it is not contiguity, but replaceability which constitutes the condition of (im)possibility for repetition (and therefore institutionalisation): it is because the repetitive moment can take the place of the 'original' moment that a (relative) identity between the two can be claimed, *not* that they exists next to each other. This does not mean, however, that we should simply swap exchange for contiguity. As I will show in the next section, the point is rather that

both logics are equally present in sedimented 'objective' moments (institutions). In order to establish that argument we have to return to structural linguistics.

### ***Syntagmatic and associative planes in linguistics.***

In presenting the two 'planes' (what Laclau refers to as logics) of language, Roland Barthes notes the following:

“The syntagmatic and associative planes are united by a close relation... a real relation of contiguity (syntagmatic) ... a potential relation of substitution (associative). ... The associative plane has evidently a very close connection with 'the language' as a system (*la langue*), while the syntagm is nearer to speech” (Barthes 1968: 59).

In one sense Laclau maintains that equivalence is closer to the system than difference, since to Laclau the unity of a system, what he calls the 'systematicity of the system' (Laclau 1996) is conditioned upon a threatening 'outside' constructing an equivalential chain (of substitutability) between all the elements of the system, thereby creating the system as such. In another way, since speech (or *parole* as Saussure called it) to linguistics generally are conceived of as the break with structural determination (being the field of the 'whims of the individual speaker'), it cannot but surprise that Laclau apparently concludes the exact opposite, making the associative plane the logic of subversion and the syntagmatic plane the logic of sedimentation, necessity and institutionalisation.<sup>1</sup>

Both Laclau and (the early) Barthes ultimately holds flawed positions but before arguing one might find the source of error in Laclau in Saussure himself (Saussure 1983). Saussure characterises the associative plane in a surprisingly 'un-structural' manner, which can almost be read of from the very naming of the plane: associative. To Saussure the only thing needed for establishing a 'chain of association' is some element of 'sameness' in the linguistic material: no matter whether in the plane of the signifier (where e.g. the ending -tions might constitute an association) or in the plane of the signifieds where the sameness can be established through e.g. reference to collectivities, associating 'people' with 'masses' with 'classes' (c.f. Barthes 1968: 85). Due to the 'looseness' of Saussure's characterisation of association, and the potential illimitability of the associative plane, one might well, as does Laclau, draw the conclusion that the logic of association is the presence of subversion in the linguistic material. However, I

---

<sup>1</sup> Without going into the precise relationship in Laclau between Antagonism and equivalence, one gets a hint of these problems in the following quote: “If language is a system of differences, antagonism is the failure of difference: in that sense it situates itself within the limits of language and can only exist as the disruption of it – that is as metaphor” (HSS: 125)

believe that one should not claim that any of the two poles are more or less institutionalised, closer to the system or the opposite is the 'element of non-systematicity within'.

My argument is that logic of the reproductive *and* of the subversive is situated at *both* poles of language. I have already shown that the logic of substitutability is highly present in the very possibility of repetition. Barthes gives us a further indication in his analysis of the way linguistic identity is established through what might be called the 'de-activation' of differences, that is "*the field of dispersion or security margin.*" Barthes points out that "the dispersal field is made up of the varieties in execution of a unit (of a phoneme, for instance) as long as these varieties do not result in an alteration of meaning (that is, as long as they do not become relevant variations); the 'edges' of the dispersal field are its margins of security.... In the food system, for instance, we can speak of the dispersal field of a dish, which will be established by the limits within which this dish remains significant, whatever 'frills' the performer brings into its preparation" (Barthes 1968: 85 my italics, adh).

It is my claim that the logic of equivalence is very present in establishing an identity (that is, an institutionalisation), in the form of varieties that do not result in alterations. Barthes' example of 'irrelevant variations' are very telling for our purpose. Under the terms 'combinative', 'individual' or 'optional' variants, he notes that "whether you are a native of Burgundy or Paris, that is to say whether you use a rolled or uvular *r*, you are understood just the same." He then notes that in connotations we can be faced with "variations which are non-significant on the plane of denotation (for instance the rolled and uvular *r*) can become significant on the plane of connotation, and from being combinative variants they refer now to two different signifieds: in the language of the theatre, one will now signify 'the Burgundian', the other 'the Parisian', without ceasing to be non-significant in the denotative system" (Barthes 1968: 85).

Now, to (the early) Barthes, who could still base his discourse upon an unchallenged distinction between denotation and connotation, the systematicity of language is not threatened by such a possibility of differences being at the same time significant *and* insignificant: as long as the significance only is effective within a connotative field, language itself (*la langue*) can still appear as essentially systematic. This view is common for all structuralists, and especially present in Louis Hjelmslev, who took the formalism to its radical conclusions (Hjelmslev 1943; 1953). And to Hjelmslev obviously there was nothing subversive at all about exchangeability in language (which he for the same reason preferred to refer to as *paradigmatic* relations).

Hjelmslev suggested the commutation test in order to determine significant differences. Significant differences are those which triggers changes in the other order of languages, that is as

in Barthes' example e.g. the difference between a uvular and a rolled r, which does not trigger a change in the plane of the signified.

To Hjelmslev the point was rather that it was (the system of) language itself that decided which differences was to be significant, and which not. Barthes development should lead him to the conclusion that this was not the case (Barthes 1990) and the privileging of connotations over denotations, making significations essentially ambiguous and unstable.

I believe this is correct, but it is an effect of a general 'rhetorical' move in our view of language (something Laclau has been quite consistent in pointing out (Laclau 2005)). But this move affects *both poles of language*, not just the paradigmatic or the associative. Without going into the precise relationship in Laclau between antagonism and equivalence, one can see a sign of these problems in the following quote "If language is a system of differences, antagonism is the failure of difference: in that sense it situates itself within the limits of language and can only exist as the disruption of it – that is as metaphor" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 125). To this I would add that metonymy is just as disruptive. If the subversive logic of the paradigmatic pole is (free) association (metaphor), where ever more moments can take each others place, then we can as easily point to a just as (inherent) subversive logic of the syntagmatic pole, namely a metonymic sliding where the precise meaning of one term is subverted by its continuous sliding into the next .

My point is that institutionalisation *as well* as subversion, takes place on both poles, in the form of both substitution and contiguity. Any institutionalisation is contingent upon the *simultaneous* 'equivalential' construction of unity, drawing borders and making a dispersed set of elements into a (relative) unity such as e.g. a medical discourse, and of their 'differential' ability of being organised in contiguity 'next to' each other in a differential order.

Of course such an order cannot reach an ultimate fullness, but it is not only threatened by free associations linking it to ever wider chains, but as well from contiguous, metonymic sliding.

In concrete analysis we should therefore look for the logic of sedimentation and reproduction at both poles, but at the same time look for its subversions a long the same poles, only this time conceived of as rhetorical movements.

Following the move of post-structuralism beyond structural linguistics we realise the ultimate 'floating' of all signification. The productivity of any signifying chain is principally unmasterable. But this goes both in the direction of the paradigmatic pole as well as the syntagmatic pole. Institutions cannot be situated on only one of the poles (even when seen as an

expansion of that pole), and neither can de-institutionalisation (subversions). A process of institutionalisation takes place along both poles – substitutability and contiguity – but subversion – metaphor and metonymy – also takes place at both poles.

### ***The primacy of the Political***

The second set of problems in the way discourse theory conceives of institutions is related to the concept of the political. The thesis of the ontological is quite a central part of Laclau's discourse theory, and might even be considered constitutive of it (e.g. Marchart 2007). What Laclau wants to fight is “what we may term the systematic absorption of the political by the social. The political became either a superstructure, or a regional sector of the social, dominated and always explained by the laws of the latter“ (Laclau 1990: 160).

The thesis of the primacy of the political comes from the very basic determinations of the theory: if there are no underlying essences determining social relations, something like a decision (by a subject) must be introduced in order to come from undecidability to the actual. Decisions always *exclude* other alternatives. The presence of alternatives is constitutive for decisions: we only decide on A by not deciding on B. According to Laclau such an exclusion introduces an element of antagonism into all social being: there is no social reality (not even the most stable of institutions) which is not based on an original decision and therefore exclusion. To Laclau, antagonisms are not to be conceived of as simple conflicts. They hold an ontological position, since they are the 'presence' of negativity within the general social positivity. They are literally the limits of society, the places where the limits of the social can be shown (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 125-6).

In another way of presenting the argument, Laclau points out that the principle of structural undecidability means that “if two different groups have taken different decisions, the relationship between them will be one of antagonism and power, since no ultimate rational grounds exist for their opting either way. It is in this sense that we assert that all objectivity necessarily presupposes the repression of that which is excluded by its establishment” (Laclau 1990: 31). The meaning of the primacy of the political is therefore not a denial of something like 'institutions' i.e. sedimented, non-politicised spaces, dominated by repetition. What it means is that even the most stable of such institutions have political histories of 'original' (political) instituting moments, where alternatives were excluded: “Insofar as an act of institution has been successful, a 'forgetting of the origins' tends to occur; the system of possible alternatives tends to vanish and the traces of the original contingency to fade. In this way, the instituted tends to

assume the form of a mere objective presence. ... It is important to realize that this fading entails a concealment. If objectivity is based on exclusion, the traces of that exclusion will always be somehow present” (Laclau 1990: 34).

To Laclau the distinction between sedimentation (institutionalisation) and 'reactivation' is coincident with one between the social and the political, granting the latter distinction ontological primacy. However, a slip can be traced in the argument.

First, in the original formulation antagonism is seen as the very presence of negativity within the social. However, as antagonism entails a – ever so minor – 'positivation', namely to point out an enemy, I claim that antagonisms cannot be granted such an ontological role. To me, the 'ontological' concept is that of dislocation (which appears in Laclau writing in 1990), implying only that a certain social being is 'shaken', out of its place, and in need of re-positioning.

Whether such dislocations are to be 'processed' as antagonistic relations, i.e. somebody is pointed out as an enemy, explaining the dislocatory experiences, is *contingent*, and dependent upon the presence of specific social discourses (or institutions).

Second the way Laclau puts the argument, stating that “*if* two different groups have taken different decisions, the relationship between them will be one of antagonism and power” (Laclau 1990: 31), shows the contingency rather than the ontological necessity of antagonising. What we can grant ontological primacy are exclusions, as a necessary consequence of contingency, but exclusions (and power) need not lead to antagonisms and politics.

If these considerations can be accepted, it must be concluded that the distinction between institutions and dislocations, between the sedimented and the 're-activated' does not follow the same line as that between 'the political' and the social. Probably one should rather speak of politics, since the Political (with a capital P) marks the idea of it being primary. As I've already pointed out, politics must be rethought as a set of specific social logics, next to other logics.

Before being accused of main-streaming Laclau beyond recognition, I want to stress that I am not reintroducing a 'regional' systems-concept of politics. Politics is not to be seen as something that takes place in certain places (specific 'institutions'). It is exactly to be seen as a set of logics, which can be present anywhere. The move from topography to logics is to be fully endorsed, which means that we should stop looking for politics as a certain object, situated in determinate places. We should instead conceive of it as a set of logics. However, these are not of a qualitative different kind than other social logics: they are a specific way of articulating social

being, just like other specific ways.<sup>2</sup>

Actually, Laclau's own recent writings might give us clues of how to specify political logics. Interestingly enough in *On Populist Reason* (Laclau 2005). Laclau considers what should be the 'minimal unit' of his analysis (of populism and of the construction of a people). Laclau opposes 'the group' as the minimal unit, on the correct grounds that this would entail the illegitimate assumption of an already existing unity – which was exactly what was to be established (Laclau 2005: 72-3). He then proposes 'social demands' as the smallest unit for understanding populism, a term that is productively ambiguous: “the notion of demand is ambiguous in English: it can mean a request, but it can also mean a claim (as in 'demanding an explanation'). This ambiguity of meaning, however, is useful for our purposes, because it is in the transition from request to claim that we are going to find one of the first features of populism” (ibid: 73).<sup>3</sup>

Not claiming that 'social demand' is exhaustive of political logics, it can function as a good example of one: we have politics, when social objects are articulated as objects of social demands (from requests to claims). Obviously it is contingent whether dislocations ('de-institutionalisations') lead to the formulation of social demands (eventually turning into claims and antagonisms), and therefore is processed as politics. Notice also that demands are posed against something: an authority or what ever, all the way up to the very claim of exchanging that authority. To me at least, this indicates the 'institutionalised' aspect of politics.

Probably politics comprises more logics than 'social demands' (and their eventual hegemonisation either in a 'democratic' or 'populist' way), which appears to be only a popular form of politics. However, my basic point is that articulating something as a demand is to shape it in a specific way, which one the one hand side is *contingent* (and therefore cannot be granted ontological primacy), on the other exactly is to invoke a certain logic of articulation, a logic that has an element of 'institutionalisation' in it. What is needed is therefore to rethink politics as specific – i.e. 'social' – logics, something which so far has been prevented by the illegitimate 'ontologisation' of the Political. Following our conclusions from the former section, one of the prerequisites of such a successful rethinking is that substitutions *and* contiguity (equivalence and difference) is no longer seen as different even opposed political logics, but as always present at the same time articulated in specific ways in the different political logics.

---

2 The reader might well see a potential move towards Luhmann's System's theory here. Luhmann's concept would be communication and codes, the different codes specifying different sub-systems. I think this way of viewing social relations has a lot to it. However when it come to politics, Luhmann's suggestion of government – opposition is clearly insufficient. Likewise his own as well as his followers treatment of the notion of 'systems' very often is far less radical than what could be the case: often 'politics' is treated in a quite traditional topographic way.

3 With 'claim' Laclau refers to the possibility of demands (as requests) being unsatisfied and eventually turning into claims of a change of the regime.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up the argument of the paper let me propose the following points:

- Laclau is right in his general or basic determination of discourse theory: One should not distinguish discourse from institutions (as in Foucault). Discourse is quite a productive term to capture the simultaneous workings of repetition and alteration or as Laclauian discourse theory terms it, sedimentation and dislocation.
- Laclau's basic point of avoiding dualisms (agent – structure), and replacing it with a view of two simultaneous working *logics* (and the concomitant distinction between subject and subject position) is theoretically very convincing.
- Institutions should be seen as internal to discourses, which on their side should be analysed as logics. Logics indicates that they are stable, able to condition 'agency', but always in the plural, always threatened, always (somewhat) dislocated.
- However, the two theoretical decisions governing the basic intuition can not be maintained: the logic of institutions cannot be placed solely at the difference/ syntagmatic plane, and it cannot be opposed to the political.
- The logic of substitution (of equivalence) is a logic essentially needed for establishing any kind of fixation, drawing limits and creating unities through deactivating differences.
- Politics is not in (ontological) opposition to institutions (the social/ sedimented). Rather politics is a set of specific social logics: of posing demands, enmity, representing a unity etc.. There is no political process so radical – not even antagonising an enemy – that it does not base itself upon sedimented meanings, i.e. 'institutionalisations'.
- As long as the otherwise highly productive notions of logics is primarily governed by the distinction between the social and the political (as e.g. in the otherwise highly recommendable book by Howarth and Glynnos, 2007) discourse theory can only progress very little in concrete analysis of both 'institutions' and more deeply politicised spaces and processes.



## *Bibliography*

Barthes, R. (1968). *Elements of Semiology*. New York, The Noonday Press.

Barthes, R. (1990). *S/Z*. Oxford, Blackwell 1990.

Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. Harlow, Longman.

Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge, MA, Polity Press.

Foucault, M. (1974). *The archaeology of knowledge*, Tavistock Publications.

Gasché, R. (1986). *The tain of the mirror : Derrida and the philosophy of reflection*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.

Glynos, J. and D. R. Howarth (2007). *Logics of critical explanation in social and political theory*. London ; New York, Routledge.

Hjelmslev, L. (1943). *Omkring sprogteoriens grundlæggelse*. København, Bianco lunos.

Hjelmslev, L. (1953). *Prologomena to a theory of language*. Baltimore, Waverly Press.

Laclau, E. (1990). *New Reflections on the revolution of our time*. London, Verso.

Laclau, E. (1996). Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics? i E. Laclau. *Emancipation(s)*. London, Verso: 36-46.

Laclau, E. (2000). Structure, History and the Political. i P. Butler Judith, E. Laclau and S. Zizek. *Contingency, hegemony, universality : contemporary dialogues on the left*. London, Verso.

Laclau, E. (2005). *On Populist Reason*. London, Verso.

Laclau, E. and C. Mouffe (1985). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London, Verso.

Luhmann, N. (1999). *Sociale systemer : grundrids til en almen teori*. København, Hans Reitzel.

Luhmann, N. and J. Bednarz (1990). *Political theory in the welfare state*. Berlin ; New York, Walter de Gruyter.

March, J. G. and J. P. Olsen (1989). *Rediscovering institutions : the organizational basis of politics*. New York, Free Press.

Marchart, O. (2007). *Post-foundational political thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Badiou and Laclau*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.

Mouzelis, N. (1988). "Marxism or post-marxism?" *New Left Review* Vol (167).

Saussure, F., de (1983). *Course in general linguistics*. London, Duckworth.