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Hansen, Allan Dreyer

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# The ontological primacy of the political? Some critical remarks

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

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## **Introduction**

Discourse theory as developed primarily by Ernesto Laclau, sometimes called the Essex School, might well be seen as universal theory. The theory contains ontological claims of e.g. signification as such and so, implicit or explicit, it has universalising ambitions. I fully endorse this ambition, inclusive of the efforts made of reaching ontological conclusions. (This is not an obvious thing. Both Foucaultians and Luhmannian systems theorists would reject the value of such a project in the first place).

Discourse theory is often presented as having 4 basic ontological claims of social relations (Laclau 1990: 26 - 36; Howarth, Norval et al. 2000). Social relations are contingent, always based on power, radical historical and primary political. I fully accept the first three claims, but I think one has to question the fourth, *the thesis of the primacy of the political*.

My argument in this paper is that the fourth thesis, of the primary ontological status of the political, is an obstacle both for the further development of discourse theory as a general theory, but also for a deepening of the theory of politics which – for many sound reasons – has been the primary focus of the theory. When theorising politics, one has to establish the distinction which governs the concept of politics. My contention is that the distinction between the social and the political is an unfortunate one. It disables the universalisation of discourse theory, i.e. making it a theory that might be applied to other articulatory logics – science, art, law, economy etc. But it also limits our abilities of further development of a theory of politics – or the political if you prefer – since elevating the political to ontological primacy hinders the theoretical determination of the specificity of politics as a social logic.

## **A critique of the thesis of the ontological primacy of the political**

It of course only makes sense to ask for a specification of politics as a social articulatory logic, next to other social logics, if it can be shown that it cannot be granted ontological primacy. Very generally my argument is that politics do not follow *necessarily* from contingency. What follows from contingency is dislocation and articulation, but as it was stated already in HSS, not al

articulations are hegemonic (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 135). Another way of putting the same argument is that what follows from undecidability is decisions and therefore power and a subject ('before' subject positions), but not all decisions (and therefore not all subjects) are political.

In the writings of Ernesto Laclau the ontological primacy of the political is obviously the most dominating trend. However, one can find expressions that point in the direction that I'm following here. For example in "Politics and the Limits of Modernity" where it is stated that: "In reality, effective ambiguity does not arise only from the attempts to fix signifiers to antagonistic discourses, although this latter case is more interesting to us. It may have a multiplicity of sources, and it can be ascribed to the phenomenon of symbolic representation" Laclau (1989: 80 - 81). I read this as a statement that the general ontological term is 'the symbolic' – or discourse – and that antagonism, and therefore politics, is only one of its manifestations. If this is so, my claim is, the political cannot be granted an ontological primacy.

Being more precise, one can analytically separate three different ways in which the thesis of ontological primacy of the political is established. The first is through the notion of antagonism, which (in the early period of discourse theory) was seen as the presence of negativity as such within social objectivity. The second is a more historical argument, where the political primacy is referred back to the historical emergence of social relations. It might well be forgotten (when social relations become sedimented), but could be 'reactivated'. Third, and finally, the potential of a political/antagonistic 'reactivation' is argued to be reason for maintaining the thesis of the primacy of the political. This line of thought is most explicit in Chantal Mouffe's writings, but can be found in many other discourse theoretical texts as well.

### **Antagonism as the presence of negativity**

Radical negativity (i.e. one that cannot be referred back to a deeper objectivity) has a constitutive role in discourse theory. It is the thesis upon which the other (the thesis of contingency etc.) is based. At the time of the first presentation of discourse theory in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (HSS)*, antagonism was defined as the limit of objectivity as such, and was seen as the point where the deferment of signification stopped, and negativity gained an actual discursive presence: "... antagonism, as a witness of the impossibility of a final suture, is the 'experience' of the limit of the

social.” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 125) “Antagonism, far from being an objective relation, is a relation wherein the limits of every objectivity are *shown*” (Ibid). If these propositions could be maintained, antagonism and therefore politics would obviously hold an ontologically privileged position. However it is difficult to do so. An antagonistic relation would have to be devoid of any positive content, simply being impossibility as such. But when we are also told that “it is because a peasant cannot be a peasant that an antagonism exists with the landowner expelling him from his land” (ibid), one must ask if not the fact that the peasant conceives of the landowner as the source of his predicament, i.e. as his enemy, is a sort of social or positive substantiation of the relation (c.f. Žižek’s early criticism of HSS, (Žižek 1990)<sup>1</sup>). I think so, and can only agree with Laclau when he (later) stated “that antagonism is *already* a form of discursive inscription – i.e. of mastery of something more primary which, from *New Reflections On the Revolution of Our Time* onwards I started calling ‘dislocation’. Not all dislocations need to be structured in an antagonistic way” (Laclau 2004: 319). If this is so, strictly speaking antagonisms are not the limit of social objectivity, but a part of it, and thus the ontological distinction between the social and the political is problematised.

The notion of constitutive antagonisms also appears later in the development of the theory. It gets its most formal expression in ‘Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics’ (Laclau 1996) where the thesis is related to a notion of signification as such. The connection between signification and antagonism is established in the following way. “If we are talking about the limits of a *signifying* system, it is clear that those limits cannot themselves be signified, but have to show themselves as the *interruption* or *breakdown* of the process of signification” (Laclau 1996: 37). This is why the conditions of possibility for signification is also its conditions of impossibility. Laclau goes on and states that these limits cannot be neutral, since it would reduce the relation between the two to one of simple difference, which could not be the limits of a system of difference. Therefore “true limits can never be neutral limits but presuppose an exclusion. ... In the case of an exclusion we have ... authentic limits because the actualisation of what is beyond the limit of exclusion would involve the impossibility of what is on this side of the limit. *True limits are always antagonistic*” (Laclau 1996: 37) (my italics, adh). The question of the limits of signification is actually answered in two different ways here. First through exclusions, and then in the concluding part, by antagonisms. The question then arises whether antagonisms are equivalent with exclusions, and my claim is that it is not. For

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1 Žižek articulates a distinction between antagonism as real (in the Lacanian sense) and antagonisms in reality. I don’t accept this distinction, since it maintains the ‘ontologisation’ of antagonism.

an exclusion to turn antagonistic, somebody has to identify with the suppressed possibility, which does not follow from exclusions as such (c.f. Laclau, 2004: 319). Exclusions necessarily follows from contingency, antagonisms however, do not. This will be further developed in the next section.

## **The political as the history of social relations**

This argument was developed in *New Reflections On the Revolution of Our Time (NR)* (Laclau 1990). It regards the problem of emergence and institutionalisation of contingent objects and relations. Laclau states: “The moment of original institution of the social is the moment at which its contingency is revealed, since that institution ... is only possible through a repression of options that were equally open. To reveal the original meaning of an act, then, is to reveal the moment of its radical contingency – in other words to reinsert it in the system of real historic options that were discarded ... by showing the terrain of original violence, of the power relations through which that institution took place” (Laclau 1990: 34).

The thesis of the ontological primacy of the political is therefore not a question of claiming that all social relations at any time are antagonistic, but rather that all social relations have a political history, i.e. is the result of an act of institution, which due to structural undecidability can only mean the exclusion of other possibilities. So, “if two groups have taken different decisions, the relationship between them will be one of antagonism and power, since no ultimate rational ground exists for their opting either way. [Therefore] all objectivity necessarily presupposes the repression that which is excluded by its establishment” (Laclau 1990: 31).

Two things should be noticed here. The first is the “if” opening the quote, which is crucial for the status we can grant it. To me it signals a certain contingency, which undermines the ontological role it is supposed to play. Antagonism is conditioned upon two groups taking different decisions, and this can hardly be given a necessary status. As it is stated in the text, “repressed possibilities are not all those that proved logically possible in a certain situation - in other words, those which do not violate the principle of contradiction; they are merely those we might call *inchoate* possibilities – that is, those whose actualization was once attempted but were cancelled out of existence” (Laclau 1990: 31), and later: “rejected alternatives do not mean everything that is *logically* possible, but those alternatives which were *in fact* attempted, which thus represented antagonistic alternatives and were suppressed” (ibid: 34).

The second is, that what can definitely be argued to follow necessarily from structural undecidability, is the presence of exclusions and power, but not of antagonism, and therefore not of politics. In another crucial passage it is stated: “The moment of original institution of the social is the moment at which its contingency is revealed, since that institution, as we have seen, is only possible through a repression of options that were equally open. To reveal the original meaning of an act, then, is to reveal the moment of its radical contingency – in other words to reinsert it in the system of real historic options that were discarded ... by showing the terrain of original violence, of the power relations through which that institution took place.” (ibid: 34). Now, the question is whether violence and power relations are *necessarily* linked to politics. I don’t think so. It is easy to imagine many other ways of dealing with exclusions and power than through antagonisms. So my conclusion is that the historical argument cannot establish the ontological primacy of the political either – only the ontological primacy of power and exclusions.

### **The ontological primacy as the potential for antagonisms**

If we have established the ontological primacy of power and exclusions and the inherent possibility of ‘re-activation’ due to structural undecidability and contingency, does that not mean that antagonisms are an ever present possibility, a potentiality of all kinds of social relations, and that we therefore can maintain the thesis of the ontological primacy of the political (c.f. Marchart 2007: 174)? This is the line of argument that is most present in Chantal Mouffe’s work. As she states: “In the domain of collective identifications, where what is in question is the creation of a ‘we’ by the delimitation of a ‘them’, the possibility always exists that this we/them relation will turn into a relation of the friend/enemy type; in other words it can always become political in Schmitt’s understanding of the term” (Mouffe 1993: 2-3).

It is the potential of collective identities to turn into enmity, i.e. turn antagonistic, which grants the political a ontological primacy. The analysis is based on Carl Schmitt, especially the following passages from *The Concept of the Political* (Schmitt 1976): “the phenomenon of the political can be understood only in the context of the ever present possibility of the friend-and-enemy groupings, regardless of aspects which this possibility implies for morality, aesthetics and economics.” (Mouffe 1993: 111) and in the following “Every religious moral, economic, ethical or other antithesis

transforms itself into a political one if it is sufficiently strong to group human beings effectively according to friend and enemy” (ibid).

It should be noted that to Schmitt all actions can be traced back to ‘final distinctions’, so that in “the realm of morality, the final distinction is between good and evil, in aesthetics between beautiful and ugly and in economics profitable and unprofitable” (Schmitt 1976: 26). To Schmitt the political not only has its own final distinction, being the criterion for a specificity or autonomy of a certain domain, but holds a different quality than the other final distinctions, which eventually frees it from belonging to a domain in the way the other forms of action do. The political in Schmitt, therefore, as Marchart puts it, is not only autonomous but also primary (Marchart 2007: 41).

Two objections can be raised vis-à-vis Schmitt’s analysis. First, the claim of the primacy of the political is based on a distinction from the other spheres or forms of action (economic, moral etc.) which are claimed to be tied to specific domains. Only the political has the ability of function ‘upon’ the other distinctions, eventually turning them into political issues. This is a rather problematic claim in itself, and translated to anti-topographical theory such as discourse theory it becomes unsustainable. Within discourse theory the different forms of action – the final distinctions – turn into social logics (Laclau 2000: 76f; Glynos and Howarth 2007: 104f), which cannot be linked to ‘domains’ in Schmitt’s sense. In an anti-essentialist discourse the contingent social objects are not grouped into different spheres by reference to a deeper objectivity. There is no pre-given ‘economical’ quality pre-establishing which objects and relations are economic, aesthetic or whatever. To argue that any object or relation might turn political, i.e. could be articulated in a political way in spite of its present articulation, can not in itself found an ontological primacy, since exactly the same can be argued of aesthetic, economic, scientific, juridical or whatever form of articulation. Second, the problem of elevating a potentiality to an ontological primacy is that it would take further specifications for the potentiality to be effectuated.<sup>2</sup> These specifications are not themselves of a primary ontological order, but belong to what Laclau terms “forms of discursive inscription” (Laclau 2004: 319).

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<sup>2</sup> I cannot go into depth with it here, but I largely agree with the Derrida-inspired criticism carried out by Abizadeh (2005: 53) who argues that it is only through a sliding from possibility to eventuality in Carl Schmitt that the argument of ontological primacy of the friend-enemy distinction may seem plausible (Derrida 1997).



The argument of potentiality of the political can be traced all the way back to *HSS*, in the "affirmation of the incomplete open and politically negotiable character of every identity" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 104). We speak here of *essential* possibilities which cannot be eliminated: the possibility for "political negotiations" (or political articulations) cannot be eradicated from any identity or object. This might be seen as an ontological quality. However, it cannot be lead to the assertion of ontological *primacy* of the political, since all identities and objects are equally open to other forms of 'negotiations' (re-articulations) of a e.g. aesthetic, economic, juridical, passionate even bureaucratic etc. kind. The *possibility* of political articulation follows from the radical contingency of objects and identities but so does the possibility of all other kind of articulations. The price for this is of course the 'reduction' of the political to 'one among other' social forms, or in the language of discourse theory to 'yet another' social logic. And this is precisely my claim.

My conclusion of these critical remarks is that discourse theory cannot maintain the thesis of the ontological primacy of the political. This claim might perhaps find some support in Laclau's latest book *On Populist Reason* (Laclau 2005a). In the section named "Some Ontological Glimpses" Laclau argues that "populism is the royal road to understand something concerning the ontological constitution of the political as such" (67). In danger of over-interpreting this statement, which might just indicate the narrower focus of the book, I read it as a sign that the political should be treated as a specific logic with its 'own' ontology, rather as the primary ontological instance as such. This finds further support in the fact that the ontological glimpses actually stated do not include antagonisms (ibid: 68f). When specifying hegemony and empty signifiers Laclau argues in terms of exclusions: "the only possibility of having a true outside would be that the outside is not simply one more, neutral element, but an excluded one, something that the totality expels from itself in order to constitute itself" (ibid: 70). And he goes on in a way, which again could be read as support the claims of this paper: "(to give a political example: it is through the demonization of a section of the population that a society reaches a sense of its own cohesion)" (ibid). If this is a *political example*, doesn't it mean that examples from other logics could have been given? I think so, and even though unity always requires something of the kind of an empty signifier, it might well be brought about in other ways within other social logics. This leads to the final point of the paper on the consequences for discourse theory.

## Consequences

The question of the ontological primacy of the political is not just an unimportant matter for philosophical speculation. Ontological questions have a significant impact on the way we are able to conceive social reality. In this final section I focus only on the theoretical leaving both the normative and the strategy of analysis aside for the moment.

The thesis of the ontological primacy of the political has theoretical consequences for the development both of the ontological categories and of the theory of politics. As long as the political is thought of as ontological primary, the truly ontological concepts – negativity, subject, articulation, empty signifier etc. – are not thought ‘purely’ enough. I.e. in stead of seeing a political production of empty signifiers as a *particular* form, the thesis of the ontological primacy of the political, has allowed us to, illegitimately I claim, letting a particular (the political) occupying the place of the universal, i.e. empty signifiers as producers of discursive unity, be it of a political or any other kind. For the same reasons discourse theory faces obstacles in advancing in grasping the basic question of what politics/ political transformations is. If negativity, whether conceived ontologically as heterogeneity (Laclau 2005) or dislocation (Laclau 1990), is not political *per se*, then a political re-articulation of the dislocated significatory system must be seen as *a* specific or particular form of articulation, next to or perhaps in stead of other possible forms of articulation.

Before tracing, in Laclau’s later work, a possible starting point for the specificity of political articulations let me mention, that a “de-ontologising” move vis-à-vis the political – or just politics – would make the explicit development of a general social discourse theory possible. As long as the social is observed from the ‘outside’, simply as the sedimented to be distinguished from the reactivated thought of as the political, there is really not the great need for a move in the direction of more general social theoretical conceptualisations. But if my critique of the thesis of the ontological primacy of the political is accepted, such a move becomes much more necessary.

Of course the general research interest might well still be oriented towards politics and political change, but if the political is thought of as a specific form of social articulations its specificity – i.e. the way it is distinguished from other social logics – becomes a central issue. Laclau has indirectly hinted at this possibility when he e.g. mentions the logic of the market, of kinship etc. (Laclau 2000: 77) and when he mentions juridical and scientific discourses. I believe a research program trying to

spell out the specific logics of such discourses or social fields – i.e. considering the specificity of the way empty signifiers/ nodal points are generated here, their specific articulatory logics, etc. – would not only contribute to the persuasiveness of discourse theory in broader academic spheres, it would also help us advance in the direction of conceptualising politics, by making clear the differences between political and other form of social articulations.

It could be argued that Laclau has already taken the first step in the direction of the specification of politics in *On Populist Reason* (2005a). Here Laclau introduces what he terms the “minimal unit” of the analysis of populism. He states: “if we want to find out the specificity of a populist articulatory practice, we have to isolate units smaller than the group and to determine the kind of unity that populism brings about.” And he goes on: “The smallest unit from which we will start corresponds to the category of ‘social demand’. As I have point out elsewhere (Laclau 2005b) the notion of ‘demand’ is in English ambiguous: it can mean a request, but it can mean having a claim (as in ‘demanding an explanation’). This ambiguity of meaning is, however, useful for our purposes because it is in the transition from request to claim that we are going to find one of the first defining features of populism” (Laclau 2005a: 72 – 73).

One might well follow this line of thought and consider whether the specificity of the political could not be said to consist in the articulation of dislocation as *demands*? The next steps would then be to spell out what the specificity of *social* demands is, and to consider the role played by the addressee of the demand, i.e. is there an moment of authority involved in political articulations (even when the claim is the overthrowing of the authority). I shall not go further into these questions here, only underline that I think the most fruitful way to go about is a simultaneous strategy which includes *both* moving ‘deeper’ into the logic of the political *and* mirror it in considerations of other social logics or discourses. Needless to say, such effort would also have to be based upon specific historical analysis.

As a way of concluding this paper I would like to turn to the notion of hegemony (HSS). The question my paper raises is whether hegemony is the general form of the logic of the particular and the universal or whether hegemony should be reserved to political articulations. I think we should go for the second option, and think of Gramsci (1971) as one of the first Marxists to have glimpsed the consequences of generalised contingency/ undecidability for the construction of *political* – or perhaps national-popular – identities. Hegemony therefore should be thought of as a specifically political category, not as the general form of establishing relation between the particular and the universal.

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