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The political logic of discourse: a neo-Gramscian view

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Abstract

This article contrasts Mark Bevir's approach to the history of ideas with a neo-
Gramscian theory of discourse. Bevir puts the case for an 'anti-foundationalist'
approach to understanding ideas, yet he defends a weak rationalism centred on
individual intentions as the original source of all meanings. Discourse theorists
specifically Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe also adopt an anti-foundationalist
perspective but pursue its implications beyond any rationalism. The advantages of
discourse theory are argued to lie in its emphasis on power and conflict in the
consitution and transformation of social meanings and identity. Laclau and Mouffe's
work, it is claimed, alerts us to a political logic of discourse that Bevir's more
rationalist approach to 'ideas' sidesteps.

1. Introduction: the 'new discursivity' in the human sciences

It is not uncommon these days to see the category 'discourse' deployed in a
variety of disciplinary contexts particularly, though not exclusively, within the
human sciences. 'Discourses' of various kinds are identified with increased
frequency as illuminating objects of enquiry in a variety of fields, from 'scientific'
discourse to discourses of 'race' and 'gender', as they operate in a multiplicity of
ways through intellectual life and society more widely. The 'new discursivity', as it has
been called,[1] has in various ways brought to the fore the languages, vocabularies
and systems of classification that construct meanings within certain social
contexts and disciplinary domains. In so doing, it underscores a growing sensitivity to
the historical specificity, the contingent constructedness, and the often subtle
ideological partiality of conceptual frameworks that might otherwise be ignored by
their practitioners or left inadequately examined by their critics. In short, the
new discursivity has problematised the practice of 'representation'; in various guises,
from post-analytical philosophy, post-Heideggerian phenomenology, post-
Saussurian linguistics and elements of post-modern theory, representation - the
manner in which the objective world is made meaningful - has been put into question
and its distinctive operation through the mediation of discourses has become a
primary site of enquiry.

Similarly, Mark Bevir's The *Logic of the History of Ideas*[2] picks up threads
already unravelled by this broader movement against rationalist or empiricist
approaches to representation in the field of the study of ideas. Bevir situates himself
in an 'antifoundational' theoretical context and defends an approach to the
historical interpretation of ideas that refutes any direct, unmediated access to the
meaning of thinkers and writers in the past.[3] Without an epistemological 'foundation',
in the sense of an incontestable point of reference for discerning the objective 'truth'
of interpretation, Bevir recommends historians of ideas avoid turning either to a naive
faith in pre-theoretical empiricism or to the more sophisticated creed of
conventionalist or contextualist reconstruction. The meaning of ideas, he argues,
is not immediately accessible without some framework that orders our interpretation;

yet, nor can it be deduced from an examination of the linguistic and conceptual frameworks that supply the backdrop to an author's work. On the contrary, argues Bevir, the meaning of ideas bears the quite specific imprint of its author's intentions and these can be discerned only if we abandon the quest for 'objective' certainty and consider what he calls the 'logic' or, following Wittgenstein, the 'grammar' of our concepts.

Bevir's apparent convergence with aspects of the new discursivity is evident in this anti-foundationalist orientation. However, it is striking to find Bevir dismissing the contribution of thinkers, particularly the so-called 'post-structuralists' such as Foucault and Derrida, to the anti-foundational perspective he develops.[4] Failure to consider the contribution of these authors more favourably, I submit, underscores a more general occlusion in his study of the political logic that many post-structuralists discern in the turn to discourse. It is this political logic that I want to consider here. My intention is not to develop an alternative view on the role of the historian of ideas or to submit Bevir's study to the wholesale analysis it deserves; rather, I hope to show how one variant of discourse analysis - the neo-Gramscian theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe - might compel us to reframe our understanding of the character of ideas in history.

2. Neo-Gramscian discourse theory

Neo-Gramscian discourse theory, as it has been developed and applied by Laclau and Mouffe, is not a methodology for examining 'ideas' as such. But it can be understood as a research programme that considers how ideas are part of the social practice of meaning-construction, interpretation and contestation that is itself inextricably linked to the operations of power and conflict.[5] Discourse theory, as Laclau and Mouffe present it, grew out of debates within Marxism concerning categories such as 'ideology', 'subjectivity' and questions of class identity. Laclau and Mouffe combined Marxism's preoccupation with power and conflict as integral features of society with a post-structuralist rejection of an a priori privilege being granted to socio-economic structures in historical change.[6] Adopting the controversial title of 'post-Marxism', they developed an antifoundationalist approach to political struggles that emphasised difference and plurality yet in the context of constant efforts to unify social orders. Three important elements of their analysis are of interest here: the notion of the 'discursive' constitution of society; the analysis of specific discourses; and the concept of hegemony. Let's look at each in turn.

The realm of the 'discursive' consists in the totality of linguistic and non-linguistic practices that structure thought and action into a relatively meaningful whole. Thus the discursive is not confined to the realm of 'ideas' and 'concepts' set apart from the rest of the world but the 'horizons of meaning', or systems of classification, that make any object or activity intelligible. Thus it constitutes an ontological dimension of social life rather than an object or domain within it: that is, the 'being' of objects is achieved only within the parameters of a discursive setting. As Laclau and Mouffe repeatedly point out, there is no 'extra-discursive' realm in the sense that, by definition, no object can have meaning if it is not inscribed within a discourse that renders it meaningful. For them society itself is a discursive construction not an object whose internal dynamics and processes can be rendered fully transparent like a machine. Now this is not to say society is simply a series of conversations or that nothing exists 'outside of a text'; rather, it is to argue that the social world is constituted through the discursive practices that furnish material objects and the social identity of subjects with a determinate sense of being.

The focus of research for discourse theorists is primarily on specific discourses that seek to unify the discursive field.[7] This is sought through signifying practices that draw relations between concepts, and between concepts and actions such that relatively stable patterns are achieved. Following Ferdinand de Saussure, the neo- Gramscians argue that each element of a discourse (a concept and/or a practice) has no intrinsic or essential meaning of its own until it is placed alongside other elements that define it in some specific way. Thus the discourse of 'the family' involves a set of interdependent conceptual distinctions between 'Mother', 'Father', 'Child' as well as a variable number of related practices concerning housework, paid work, the distribution of authority and power and so on. Meaning is therefore a function of difference not a positive feature of any entity. In principle, therefore, meaning is intrinsically unstable and open to modification as structures of difference - or discourses - change. Despite the efforts of some to find an ultimate structural principle that will stabilise meaning once and for all (e.g. Marxists' emphasis on the 'economic structure', liberals' emphases on individual rationality or theological conceptions of God) Laclau and Mouffe argue that the discursive character of social relations and identities makes them constantly vulnerable to contestation and modification. It is this openness to modification that stems from the relational character of discursive meaning that leads them to grant primacy to the political logic of discourse. This brings us to the concept of hegemony.

From the prison writings of the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe adopt (and modify) the concept of hegemony to denote the structuring of meanings through discursive practices.[8] For Gramsci, hegemony denoted the capacity of a class to transcend its narrow, corporate interests in order to symbolise a variety of popular struggles that were strictly external to class or economic practices. To hegemonise a specific group's political demands was to incorporate it into a wider identity, to eliminate its difference sufficiently for it to be viewed as an integral part of a larger, distinctive worldview that joined together the otherwise contradictory and unstable institutional domains of state, civil society and economy.[9] Laclau and Mouffe take from Gramsci the idea of hegemony as an 'articulatory practice' that 'sutures' concepts and practices around key principles such that certain elements come to be viewed as 'naturally' related or contiguous. Divorced from any essential foundational terrain (i.e. the economy: Gramsci's 'fundamental classes'), hegemony is no longer conceived as a strictly class practice but, rather, as the principle of discursive articulation in general (that is, in all contexts). In the process of hegemonising, signifying elements are modified by being structured around key principles in such a way that temporarily constrains their application and limits what Derrida has called 'the play' of meaning.

It is this limitation that underscores the political aspects of discourse: by constructing and constraining common meanings, power and exclusion are an essential feature of hegemony. Dominant discourses succeed by displacing alternative modes of argument and forms of activity; by marginalising radically different discourses; by naturalising their hierarchies and exclusions presenting them in the form of 'common sense'; and by effacing the traces of their own contingency. A successful hegemony will seek to render itself incontestable. Yet, despite this, no hegemony can ever be completely successful. For the political logic of discourse ensures that the condition of its possibility is simultaneously the condition of its impossibility. A hegemonic discourse cannot fix meaning totally and finally because exclusion and difference are intrinsic to it. There is always an 'outside' that threatens the stability of the 'inside' and reveals the traces of its contingency, that is, its hegemonic stabilisation through power and exclusion.[10]

3. Politics and meaningin Bevir's Logic

How might this outline of neo-Gramscian discourse theory make us think about the arguments contained in Bevir's book?

Clearly, Bevir's examination of the logic of the history of ideas and Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism are distinct projects in themselves with quite different audiences and objectives in mind. Both, however, are concerned with the comprehension of ideas in history. That is, they reflect upon how meanings are both fashioned as historical artefacts, how they change and how they might be interpreted. The major difference between their respective projects consists in the emphasis Bevir makes on delineating the proper role of the historian as an interpreter of ideas and the neo-Gramscians' emphasis on understanding how ideas are intrinsic to the very making of history. This difference accounts for the way in which ideas are figured in each: for Bevir ideas are associated with broadly rational (or consistent) individual minds and demand a 'procedural individualism' to unearth them; for Laclau and Mouffe, however, it is ideas as popular meanings and identity-producing practices that concerns them and this demands what might be called a more 'social constructionist' approach.

What I think the neo-Gramscians expose us to, however, is something that is largely missing from Bevir's study and that is an appreciation of the inescapably political function of ideas. Now I do not mean ideas about politics conventionally understood, such as the state, the nature and limits of public authority, etc., but rather the way in which ideas are bound up with the formation, contestation and reformation of human practices. These are 'political' in as much as, by necessity, they entail the delimiting of shared understandings, the legitimisation of certain kinds of practice that favour some states of affairs over others and the imposition of social hierarchies. In short, the production of meaning is simultaneously an operation of power. Although Bevir considers it to have little of import to add to the history of ideas, post-structuralism (and in particular its formulation through neo-Gramscian discourse theory), has alerted us to this process and posed it as a challenge to how we think about ideas.

There are two specific and related areas of Bevir's analysis that I want to address in order to illustrate this point, both of which I have some sympathy for because they converge with a discourse theoretical model but which, in light of what I has already been said, are also limited. They are: the idea of the irreducible specificity of meaning; and the conceptualisation of change in the history of ideas.

3.1. The specificity of meaning

Bevir argues for an historical understanding of ideas that is focused on the irreducible specificity of their meaning for the authors who produce them and, later, the readers who interpret them. Thus he claims 'the objects studied by historians of ideas are expressed beliefs'.[11] By this he means that the meaning of any work cannot be read exclusively from its context - from linguistic conventions - or aligned solely with an intended illocutionary act which seeks to achieve a certain end; although these undoubtedly enter into the reconstruction of historical meanings.[12]
'Hermeneutic meanings', he argues, are influenced by contexts and conventions but our understanding of the latter cannot guarantee our full understanding of expressed beliefs which are informed by quite individual perceptions.[13] It is these individual perceptions that underscore the very possibility of historical change: '… we cannot allow for innovations if we try to fix the meanings of utterances by reference to abstract social meanings. Hermeneutic meanings must be irreducible'.[14]
Furthermore, in response to historians such as Skinner who employ a version of speech-act theory, Bevir argues that what an author was trying to do with an

utterance (i.e. its 'illocutionary force') is analytically distinct from what was meant by it.[15]

We can see a similar emphasis on the irreducibility of meaning in discourse theory. In discourse theory, meanings are never fixed once and for all, nor are they deducible from some structural context. The specificity of a discourse lies in its novel rearticulation of signifying elements from pre-existing discourses that alter that discourse or build a new one. These elements (such as words and concepts) are always modified when applied to new contexts even when the discursive framework stays broadly the same. Their differential relationship to other elements will alter as terms and concepts are 'stretched' and 'contracted' in different ways to create new meanings and to signify new or previously unacknowledged entities. Thus like Bevir, Laclau rejects any notion that structures and conventions (social and conceptual) determine in any final sense the specific meaning of actions and events.

Whilst both perspectives agree on the notion of an irreducible specificity to the production of meanings, they differ on how this process is to be understood. For Bevir, the specificity of meaning must be traced back by the historian to the intentional purposes of the individual author (and, later, the reader). For Laclau, however, the issue is not about the intentions or beliefs of the subject but the social effects of a process of resignification. Meaning, for him, is ultimately a matter of social significance.

To justify his argument that hermeneutic meanings are irreducible to conventions or even illocutionary intentions, Bevir argues that such meanings 'come from the thoughts people intend to convey by making the utterances they do'.[16] Thus meanings originate in individual viewpoints or beliefs and are expressed in works. To support this reasoning, Bevir argues that we must assume that expressed beliefs are 'sincere, conscious and rationally held' by the individuals who express them. That way, expressed beliefs (in works) can be accepted as faithful products of the individual viewpoints that immediately precede them.

It is in this point that Bevir's argument introduces what post-structuralists typically renounce: namely, the notion of a subject - relatively conscious and rational and honest - able to 'express' a viewpoint in its works. It is akin to what Derrideans cite as the effort to privilege 'speech' over 'writing', that is, the authentic presence of intended meaning over its corrupting representation through the mediation of signs.[17] And this is despite Bevir's stated preference for an antifoundational theory that does away with notions of 'unmediated' presence. Now it is not that individuals are not the authors of their words or that they or we do not think that they are conscious, rational and honest; rather the problem is that Bevir's definition of these conditions cannot adequately support his defence of locating the original meaning of ideas. Bevir asserts the 'conceptual priority' of sincerity over insincerity, the conscious over the unconscious, and the rational over the irrational.[18] However, deducing, as he does, that each one makes sense only in light of the other does not establish conceptual priority but rather a conceptual interdependence. That is, sincerity, rationality and consciousness are indeed defined in relation to what they are not; their 'others' mark the limit of their operation. The intending subject consists therefore in a set of structured oppositions. But the primacy of the sincere, conscious, and rational over others is not a logical assumption but the outcome of decision to set a limit, a decision made not abstractly but through social conventions. Moreover, these conventions typically display the traces of power through which they are enforced. Thus could authorship and the capacity to reason be denied women and people of colour for the best part of known history. Bevir's 'logical assumption' is not so much

wrong as an incomplete picture that occludes the discursive and political settings that determine what kind of subjects get listened to.

I think Bevir's 'anthropocentric' concept of objectivity also leads in this direction. He argues for a notion of objectivity in interpretation that is not conceived simply as the unmediated experience of reality but is rather the outcome of 'a comparison between rival bodies of knowledge'. If the analysis of objective knowledge is, as he accepts, a 'fallible human practice'[19] it is precisely because it is open to the influence of the quite prejudicial and partial views of its enquirers. Given this, objectivity can only be a process of achieving agreement through dialogue and debate. Bevir accepts that 'Objectivity rests on the possibility of our comparing rival accounts of historical meanings'[20] but he does not fully consider, outside the rather narrow confines of the community of historians, exactly what might be entailed here, how some rival accounts are rendered inadmissible by virtue of who proposes them or the manner in which they do. Once more, these are political questions and in a purportedly antifoundational perspective it is curious that they are not addressed.

3.2. Conceptualising change

The second, related issue that I want to discuss is Bevir's conceptualisation of the process of change in the history of ideas.

On the basis of his understanding of meaning as originating in the beliefs of individuals, Bevir develops an account of the 'diachronic' process of changing belief. Because beliefs are individually held and not passive reflections of the traditions and contexts that inform them, individuals are able to change their beliefs in light of a whole variety of different experiences and challenges.[21] Whilst there is no way of predicting how specific individuals might change their viewpoints, nevertheless the historian of ideas can, according to Bevir, at very least account for this process. Again, Bevir underlines his preference for a view of the subject as a rational agent able, though not in any way automatically compelled, to distance herself to some extent from the traditions that inform her. In this way traditional beliefs can be applied to new contexts and experiences, as well as transformed.

Thus for Bevir, changing belief is largely a rational process in which individual agents reflect on their inherited traditions and adapt those traditions in accordance with their own reasoning. Obviously, there might be any number of ways in which new challenges or new beliefs might be incorporated into inherited traditions. Or traditions might have to be abandoned in order to maintain a commitment to a new belief; this is what Bevir refers to as a 'dilemma'.[22] In the face of a dilemma, the entire 'web of beliefs' that individuals hold dear may eventually be confronted following what he describes as 'an inner, Socratic dialogue of question and answer'.[23] All sorts of other closely held beliefs might have to be adapted or even abandoned in order adequately and rationally (again, in the weak sense of consistency) to incorporate this new belief. Through a process of 'pushing and pulling' previous and new beliefs might be brought 'into a coherent relationship with one another'.[24] It is this quest for 'coherence' that Bevir takes as evidence of the accuracy of an assumption of rationality on the part of individual subjects: 'One set of beliefs arises out of another because the believer exercises his reason'.[25] Interestingly, Laclau has also developed a theoretical framework for thinking through transformations in discourses. However, his analysis begins not from the assumption of rationality (however weak) on the part of individual subjects but from the character of discourses themselves. Indeed, subjects are viewed as having no positive characteristics as such. Following Lacanian psychoanalysis, Laclau understands subjects to consist in a 'lack', that is, an absence of any determinate content or identity. In his view, discourses provide

temporary 'subject positions' with which individuals make identification to furnish themselves with a relatively secure identity.[26] Thus, for example, the discourse of the family specifies maternal and paternal roles for subjects to 'fill out' their identities. These roles come ready-made with a cluster of legitimate functions and capacities that offer subjects apparently 'reasonable' systems of belief and action. As people 'speak' through discourse, so they make identifications that anchor their identities and present them as always-already present.

Because discourses consist not simply in beliefs but a whole range of practical and conceptual elements that go to make up a social identity, transformations in discourse imply much more than simply conceptual reordering or 'an inner, Socratic dialogue of question and answer'. Transformations in discourse entail changes in the identities of the subjects who identify with them. Thus, for instance, the changing discourses of race and gender over the past 30 years have been much more than simply a conceptual 'pushing and pulling'. It has involved a series of often traumatic and violent social and political struggles, huge leaps of imagination and constant, difficult and often unsuccessful interventions into the traditions of liberal toleration, public morality and ingrained institutional prejudices. The outcome of these struggles has been not simply a change in beliefs or attitudes, although this is certainly the case, but an entirely different series of expectations, assumptions and practices. In short: social identities have been transformed.

To call this a 'rational' process, the outcome of the exercise of reason in which one belief arises out of another, would be an overly benign and rather blurred view of events. Rather, the process by which discursively constituted identities are transformed involves what Laclau calls a hegemonic struggle over the terms of rationality itself. Thus Laclau's framework for conceptualising change centres on hegemonic struggles to define the character and limits of the social world and the mode in which it is thought, or what Gramsci called the struggle for 'common sense'. For Laclau such struggles are not reducible to rational processes implied in the notion of 'an inner, Socratic dialogue'. On the contrary, the logic governing the transformation of a discourse is political in as much as it cannot be referred back to a stable subject if the identity of the subject itself is transformed by it: rather, the decision to change is achieved by a radical leap into an alternative horizon of meaning or discourse. To accept some new discursive principle (e.g. that moral and legal equality extends to all people regardless of gender or colour) certainly extends a pre-existing tradition (of liberal rights) and yet not in a way that can be reduced to the internal deliberations of rational subject. For reason itself (in this case, liberal political reason) has been altered and in the process so have the identities of the subjects who identified with it.[27]

What is it that accounts for the change, then, if we cannot ground the process on the internal deliberations of a rational subject? For Laclau the answer lies in the character of certain types of discourse; more specifically, in the operation of what he calls 'empty signifiers'. The empty signifier is a term whose specific content has been discarded and which functions in certain discourses to articulate a whole series of elements from pre-existing discourses. Terms such as Justice, Freedom, Order and so forth are well-known examples.[28] Laclau argues that these signifiers function by symbolising not any specific set of actions or meanings but by standing as the universal symbol that embraces them all. This effect is often achieved only in certain contexts when a series of social dislocations has undermined any stable sense of meaning and value. Under such conditions, particular elements of a discourse (e.g. distinct social activities and identities) are loosened from their traditional structures and become available for rearticulation around new principles. Empty signifiers are organising principles with a distinctive symbolic function; they

operate by symbolising what Laclau calls an 'absent fullness', that is a sense of settled meaning and order that is yet to come.

When discourses changeFand the beliefs and meanings associated with themFit is the outcome not of a rational deliberation but a process of resignification by means of identification with new empty signifiers. As with Bevir's argument, this will involve an effort to adapt old beliefs to a new set of principles and possibly even the dropping of some beliefs. But rather than treat this as a rational effort to 'accommodate' a dilemma, Laclau argues the process is motivated by the symbolisation of a traumatic absence that disrupts previously stable patterns of meaning and compels subjects to make radically new identifications.[29] For example: the Tories' recent efforts to change the minds of voters by deploying the 'threat' of the loss of Sterling and its replacement by the Euro. The point here was not simply to get people to internally deliberate, and adapt their beliefs in such a way as to get the Tories elected. Rather, 'the pound' was deployed as an empty signifier designed to alter the rationality and sense of identity of the public. The case for retaining the pound was much less a detailed economic argument than a battle to defend the British 'way of life', to preserve its 'national autonomy' and the liberty of its people, and to hold back the tide of 'foreign' invasion, and so forth. 'Saving the pound' was meant to persuade the public that they ought to reconfigure their beliefs in light of the imminent threat to collective identity. In short, it was a political struggle designed to alter the very rationality and identity of subjects.

4. Conclusion

I have argued for a political understanding of the character of ideas in history. Bevir's anti-foundationalism goes some way in making this case, too, but it stops short of grasping the political logic that neo-Gramscian theorists of discourse have succeeded in elaborating. This is not to say that the history of ideas ought to be focused simply and exclusively on social struggles for hegemony; but it is to suggest that there is something to be learned from the sensitivity to power and exclusion when we think of 'ideas' in terms of 'discourses'. I have indicated two areas in Bevir's discussion that might benefit from thinking this way, namely: the focus on the specificity of meaning and the conceptualisation of change in the history of ideas. In both these areas there is sufficient reason to be aware that power and exclusion are an integral part of how we conceptualise the status and meaning of ideas in history.

Acknowledgements

Footnotes

1 The term is used by D. Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis in their introduction to D. Howarth, A. J. Norval and Y. Stavrakakis (eds), Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: identities, hegemonies and social change (Manchester: M.U.P, 2000), p. 1.

2 M. Bevir, The Logic of the History of Ideas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

3 Bevir comments most fully on the character of his anti-foundationalism in the 'Conclusion' to the Logic. See in particular pp. 310–315.

4 Post-structuralists tend to be associated with an 'irrationalist relativism'. See Bevir, Logic, pp. 116–123, 310.

5 The major works in Laclau and Mouffe's elaboration of discourse theory are as follows: E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy; towards a radical democratic politics (London: Verso,

1985); E. Laclau, New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time (London: Verso, 1990); E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, 'Post-Marxism without Apologies', New Left Review, 166 (1987) now in New Reflections; E. Laclau, Emancipation(s) (London: Verso, 1996); and J. Butler, E. Laclau and S. Z$ iz$ek, Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left (London: Verso, 2000).

6 On the development of Laclau and Mouffe's work see J. Torfing, New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe and Zi$zek (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) and A-M. Smith, Laclau and Mouffe: the radical democratic imaginary (London: Routledge, 1998). Laclau gives his own account of his intellectual development in an interview reproduced in New Reflections, Ch. 8

7Much of this research is currently undertaken by students on the Masters programme in 'Ideology and Discourse Analysis', initiated by Laclau, at the University of Essex. For a representative example see the essays in D. Howarth, A. J. Norval and Y. Stavrakakis (eds), Discourse Theory and Political Analysis.

8 Laclau and Mouffe develop their argument through a 'genealogy' of hegemony in the first three chapters of Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Their explicit modification of some of Gramsci's terms is presented at pp. 136–138.

9 See A. Gramsci, Selection from the Prison Notebooks, trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971). I have outlined Gramsci's ideas in Gramsci's Political Analysis: a critical introduction (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), esp. Chs 2–4.

10 This point is expressed well in terms of the 'constitutive outside' in Derrida's philosophy. See H. Staten, Wittgenstein and Derrida (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).

11 Logic, p. 142.

12 'The meanings studied by historians of ideas are products of the creative activity of individuals, not linguistic contexts or social conventions'. Ibid, p. 142.

13 See the discussion throughout Ch. 2. of the Logic. Historical authors may well misunderstand their own contexts and conventions and, furthermore, historians arguably can grasp hermeneutic meanings without recourse to contexts and conventions.

14 Ibid, p. 49.

15Here Bevir argues for a distinction between meaning and action. Intended actions may possibly contrast with intended meanings. See Ibid, pp. 129–142.

16 Ibid, p. 129.

17On Derrida's distinction between speech and writing and the wider philosophical project that informs his analysis, see C. Howells, Derrida: Deconstruction from Phenomenology to Ethics (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), esp. Ch. 3.

18 These arguments can be found on pp. 142–171 of the Logic.

19 Ibid, p. 128.

20 Ibid, p. 124.

21 See Ibid, p. 223: 'Traditions would deny the free play of reason only if they fixed our responses to thingsy[B]ecause traditions never fix limits to the conclusions people can reach, the free exercise of our reason is not undermined by the presence of an authoritative tradition.' More accurately, it can be said that traditions set limits but do not determine that movement remains within those limits.

22 Ibid, pp. 227–234.

23 Ibid, p. 230.

24 Ibid, p. 236.

25 Ibid, p. 238.

26 See the discussion on the subject by Laclau and Mouffe in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, pp. 114–122. Compare with Laclau, New Reflections, pp. 30, 39–41 where the argument is developed around the concept of 'dislocation'.

27 Laclau uses Wittgenstein᾽s notion of 'following a rule᾽ to pinpoint the radical leap involved in changing the ordering principles of a discourse. See New Reflections, pp. 29‒30.

28 Less grand (but equally empty) examples include: 'Efficiency' in managerial discourse or 'Quality' in current educational discourse.

29 See Laclau's discussion of persuasion and force, 'Community and its Paradoxes: Richard Rorty's Liberal Utopia', in Emancipation(s).