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**Crises, Hegemony and Change
in the International System:
A Conceptual Framework**

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Crises, Hegemony and Change in the International System: A Conceptual Framework

Abstract

The paper tries to shed light on the conceptual link between international crises like the one following September 11, 2001, the Asian financial crisis of 1997/1998, the end of the Cold War or major international conflicts, and processes of change in the international system. It argues that cultural structures rest on their continuous instantiation through social practices, thereby making them coterminous with process. Process is constituted by meaningful acts of social agents, and can thus only be grasped by analysing meaning. Meaning is transmitted by language. Meaningful language is never reducible to individual speakers; it is a social act. In the paper, I call this process discourse. Linking Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with the theory of hegemony developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, I will finally be able to show how hegemonic discourses serve as the nexus between crises and cultural structures and how they make cultural change possible.

Key words: Crisis, change, discourse, poststructuralism, hegemony, international politics

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Zusammenfassung

Krise, Hegemonie und Wandel im internationalen System: Ein konzeptioneller Rahmen

Der Artikel untersucht den theoretischen Zusammenhang zwischen internationalen Krisen wie der Asienkrise, dem Ende des Kalten Kriegs oder den Folgen des 11. September 2001 und Prozessen des kulturellen Wandels in der internationalen Politik. Das Ausgangsargument lautet, dass sich kulturelle Strukturen im politischen Prozess permanent neu bilden; Kultur wird durch den sozialen Interaktionsprozess konstituiert. Durch Sprache erzeugte Bedeutung verleiht dem Prozess seine sozialwissenschaftlich analysierbare Substanz. Sprache ist niemals als isolierter Akt, sondern immer als soziale Handlung zu verstehen. In dem Artikel wird dieser Zusammenhang mit dem Begriff des Diskurses beschrieben. Als Analyseraster werden Einsichten der Kritischen Diskursanalyse mit der Theorie der Hegemonie von Ernesto Laclau und Chantal Mouffe verbunden.

Crises, Hegemony and Change in the International System: A Conceptual Framework

Dirk Nabers

Article Outline

1   Introduction

One of the well accepted clichés of our time claims that we are living in a world of major and rapid transformations (Rosenau 1990; Walker 1993; Cox 1996; Holsti 2004). Barry Jones has already demonstrated more than two decades ago that change of some sort is a ubiquitous feature of human life (Jones 1981). The accelerated pace of today's changes does, however, seem to bewilder more and more people, ordinary individuals as well as academics. Disorientation in the fields of international security, economic, environmental or cultural change stems from the unanswerable nature of questions such as: 'Where are we going?', 'How can we influence developments?', and also 'Who are we?'

The following analysis deals with these questions, addressing them first from a theoretical perspective, then from a methodological one. We will, however, not restrict ourselves to questioning change, but will critically inquire into the nature of the questions posed above.

Most crucially for the analysis, it has to be clear on what kinds of ontological and epistemological foundations assertions about the likelihood and quality of change are made. The study does not argue for a categorical primacy of ontology, as postulated by Colin Wight (2006), but rests on the assumption that every scientific position entails ontology *and* epistemology, with both perspectives mutually instituting the other. While *scientific realism*, as proposed by Wight and Alexander Wendt (1999), implies that objects exist independently of human minds, this does not hold true for social objects, as Wight himself acknowledges: 'no people, no social objects' (Wight 2006: 26). As this study is concerned with social objects and not with natural ones, it accentuates the role of agents' conceptions of what they are doing in their activity. These conceptions must be expressed verbally to be analysable.

Hence, while Holsti (2004: xiii-viv) deplores a widespread lack of clarity with regards to the question of what we actually mean by change, this study offers a very straightforward posture: Change will be understood as discursive change, leading from one hegemonic discourse to another. Discourse will in its most general sense be seen as a the structural totality of articulatory differences in a political field (Laclau/Mouffe 1985: 105-114). The level-of-analysis of the study is the international system, with states as the primary agents (Jackson 2004; Wendt 2004) involved in discursive practices. The structure of the system is consequently also discursive; the social, and what we call the culture of the system, are constituted entirely by discourse. International institutions, internationally shared principles, norms, and rules are conceptualised as discursive articulations. If the same 'reality' is reflected in the language of all interacting agents, this is what we call a hegemonic constellation. Different actors are competing for hegemony by offering their specific 'systems of narration' as a compensatory framework for overcoming crisis events. Hegemony, as the strategic term of the analysis, refers to questions of how a particular political field is constituted, what is possible and impossible in politics.

Talking about discursive 'structure' does not imply a static or closed view of the international 'architecture'. On the contrary, in order to be able to think of change, we have to assume a certain flexibility or openness of structures, instigated by meaningful interactions between agents. Meaning, it will be argued, does not depend on reference to the world 'out there' or on ideas about an external reality. Instead, ideas are conceptualised as an offspring of the meanings we learn and reproduce, not their source; nor are they the origin of the language we speak. We have no immediate access to their meaning without analysing the words that signify them. To be very clear about this: Ontologically, it would make no sense to argue that the entire world is discourse. As Wight points out, '[t]hat we can only know things under certain descriptions does not negate the ontological status of that to which we refer' (Wight 2006: 27).

However, this study looks for a proper answer to the question of how we can know things. With Wight, it argues that we can only know the world 'under certain descriptions'. Consequently, it focuses entirely on the study of these descriptions and does not ask for a reality that exists independently of these descriptions. In accordance with Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theory, we will argue that, 'in language there are only differences without *positive terms'* (Saussure 1966: 120). Taking meaning as differential, not referential, simply gives language priority in the analysis of 'the world': If the world, the things and concepts we seem to know, existed somewhere outside language, words would be the same from language to language, culture to culture, and no ambiguities would arise. For de Saussure, meaning exists in the sign and only there. It is linguistically constructed; people talk, write and argue the world into existence. Undoubtedly there is a world 'out there' that exists independently of the observers mind, but as will be argued later in more detail, we do not have immediate access to its meaning without referring to language.

Put simply, we are interested in how intersubjective meanings change in international discourses. The transmission of meaning through discourse is the driving force behind social change. International *crises* are crucial in processes of change, as they produce a void of meaning, a structural gap that has to be filled, a situation of fragmentation and indeterminacy of articulations. As will be clearer in the course of this article, crisis is a constant political phenomenon. Without crisis, politics would lose its substance and direction. Any political decision is taken as a response to crisis. There are bigger and smaller crises, triggering changes of different magnitude. In international discourses, different actors are competing for hegemony by offering their specific systems of narration as a reparatory framework to overcome crisis events and close the open structure.

The focus on language as a differential system seems justified by the failure of traditional IR theories to account for change in international politics in general and changes in the structure and organization of international institutions in particular. As R.B.J. Walker observed several years after the end of the Cold War, '[t]here is hardly a theoretical orientation in the modern human sciences that has not been chastised for its conservative bias, for its neglect of change and its consequent reification of the status quo' (Walker 1993: 113).

IR scholars have in the past offered numerous different theories to explain the structure of the international system, most prominently (neo-) realism, (neoliberal) institutionalism, liberalism and social constructivism. The approaches, though occupying a wide ontological range between rationalism and constructivism, are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive.

Structural realism, or neorealism, in the version offered by Kenneth Waltz (1979), offers no account of structural change at all, since it is concerned primarily with structural continuity (for a critique Walker 1993: 116-120; Jones 1981: 14-16; Dessler 1989). The theory focuses on

the objectively defined structure of the system and its constraining effects on state behaviour. It consists of three layers: Firstly, the ordering principle of the international system is anarchy; secondly, states are 'like units'; and thirdly, the structure of the system is defined by the distribution of power between these units. While the first two layers are static and are by definition not apt to change, the distribution of power is left unexplained by treating it endogenous to the international system (Drulák 2001: 364). After all, states are conceptualised as unitary rational actors ontologically and as 'black boxes' epistemologically; process is seen as continuous inter-state relations constrained by the overall structure of the system. David Dessler (1989) has therefore described Waltz's theory as 'positional', with the structure of the system resulting from the positioning of ontologically prior units, in contrast to a transformational model, which conceptualizes structure as materials for action that change as action unfolds.

For a long time the most serious challenge to realist balance-of-power theorizing came from a theory that is firmly rooted in the rationalist paradigm as well. *(Neo-)Institutionalist* arguments (Keohane 1984; Keohane/Nye 2001) also start from the assumption of self-interested actors operating in an anarchic state system. Yet, the dogmatic neorealist assumptions are somewhat relaxed in neoinstitutionalist accounts. They often soften the relative gains hypothesis in admitting the desire of states to achieve absolute gains in welfare and security (Zangl/Zürn 1999). Institutionalists maintain that growing international *interdependence* makes change from uncooperative to cooperative behaviour and institutionalisation possible, and that empirical evidence exists to underline this argument (Keohane/Nye 2001; Schirm 2002). In the classical definition of Keohane's and Nye's Power and Interdependence, the concept of interdependence refers to a state of mutual dependence, i.e. a situation in which one actor is being determined or significantly affected by the forces of another actor. Interdependent relationships always involve costs, since autonomy of choice is restricted. Such a situation can either imply mutual losses or gains. It is the asymmetries of interdependence that provide sources of influence for states in their relations with other states and can lead to behavioural change (Keohane and Nye 2001: Chapter 1).

Institutionalist research of the last three decades provided a fruitful way to think about international institutions as helpful tools for states to overcome problems of collective action, high transaction costs or information deficits. Institutionalists assume that states initially engage in pro-communicative activities for egoistic reasons, e.g. because state goals cannot be pursued unilaterally. The argument depends on a mechanism of functional institutional efficiency in order to account for social change. The first step for states to be taken on the way to create an institution is 'policy coordination', which requires that the actions of different states be brought into conformity through a process of negotiation. This is likely to occur

when one state considers the action taken by other states as facilitating realization of its own objectives (Keohane 1984: 51-52).

In the 1980s, it was Keohane's *After Hegemony* (1984) and Stephen Krasner's edited volume on international regimes (1983) that compellingly showed how individually rational action by states could impede mutually beneficial cooperation. Moreover, these scholars argued, states that interact with each other develop norms that shape collective standards of behaviour. Keohane included the notions of 'bounded rationality' and normative expectations in his work; however, he also neglected one important question: How can one think of policy coordination without considering the communicative processes that occur during the negotiations between states? Institutionalist theories can only explain initial short-term, behavioral change, i.e. the impetus for engaging in communicative action, but fail to account for the development of long-term communal collaboration and systemic change (for a critique Sterling-Folker 2000) since they take the exogenous character of interests and identities as given. Yet, as I will later argue, in order to explain what is going on, to grasp the intersubjective quality of convergent representations – as the constitutive basis of international institutions (Kratochwil/Ruggie 1986: 764) – we have to look at meaningful interactive processes between actors.

It is without great doubt that the integration of interactive processes is a major prerequisite for the analysis of structural change. One of the first theorists to turn this finding into a fruitful IR concept was Karl Deutsch. A deeper look at his model of security communities (Deutsch 1957 and Deutsch 1970) makes this clear. His observations of half a century ago are considered particularly relevant by many theorists of IR because of the aforementioned transformation period in IR as well as in IR theory, the latter involving a turn from rational choice to sociologically oriented theorizing. Whereas Waltz's Realism assumes that international politics is determined by the distribution of power, i.e. a peculiarly asocial environment, Deutsch's approach recognizes that international reality is a social construction driven by collective understandings, emerging from social interaction. His explanation of international cooperation acknowledges the existence of both material and normative grounds of foreign policy action. It differs from Neoliberal Institutionalism because in this theory as well as in Realism collective interest is assumed as pre-given and hence exogenous to social interaction (e.g. Wendt 1994: 389; Ruggie 1998: 118-119).

Constructivist theorists, in particular, have attempted to resuscitate Deutsch's concept of security community (e.g. Adler and Barnett 1998; Acharya 2001). While Realism and Neoliberal Institutionalism focus on material structure to understand international relations, Deutsch brings together processes and interactions, which eventually lead to dependable expectations, the unearthing of new interests, and collective identities. Specifically, Deutsch's

approach addresses 'the conditions under which stable, peaceful relations among nations are possible and likely' (Deutsch 1970: 33). According to Deutsch's observations, states sooner or later have to integrate themselves into some kind of community in order to achieve a long lasting peace. A *security community* can be 'considered to be a group which has become integrated, where integration is defined as the attainment of a sense of community, accompanied by formal or informal institutions or practices, sufficiently strong and widespread to assure peaceful change among members of a group with 'reasonable' certainty over a 'long' period of time' (Van Wagenen 1952: 10-11, as quoted in Deutsch 1970: 33).

Security communities in Deutsch's sense entail 'stable expectations of peace among the participating units or groups' (Deutsch 1970: 33). The idea that actors can share values, norms, and symbols that provide social identity leads to the assumption that states will settle their differences peacefully. The basis of the concept is that communication makes social interaction possible, that actually '[c]ommunication alone enables a group to think together, to see together, and to act together' (N. Wiener, as cited in Deutsch 1966: 77).

Deutsch's work is 'transactionist' rather than 'constructivist, yet what brings him close to constructivism is his focus on the sociological nature of state interactions, especially his emphasis on collective perceptions and identifications. That is why constructivism, drawing on intersubjectively shared ideas, has been the main theoretical framework for the study of security communities in recent years. Its influence can be seen in three areas (Acharya 2001: 3-4): First, security communities are viewed as socially constructed, i.e. cooperation among states is to be understood as a social process that may redefine the interests of states in matters of war and peace; second, certain norms delineate state interests and constitute state identities; and third, by focusing on the social construction of a community and the constitution of common identities, the impact of immaterial forces in shaping international politics is illustrated. Yet what is missing in most traditional accounts of security communities is a discussion of social change. How does a group of countries develop into a security community in the first place? What are the origins of security communities, or, in Wendt's (1999: ch. 6) words, how does enmity between states turn into stable and fruitful rivalry or even friendship?

A look at liberal theories of International Relation provides answers to our questions by looking at domestic structures and processes to account for foreign policy changes of states (Czempiel 1981; Moravcsik 1997). Liberals consider institution-building as the result of a convergence of benevolent, cooperation-prone national interests, promoted by domestic coalitions for which such cooperation might bring gains (e.g. Risse-Kappen 1995; 1996). Choosing a special kind of institution then resembles the 'loyalty a consumer might give to the store with the most competitive rates on its charged card.' (Sterling-Folker 2000: 102). A note-

worthy branch of liberal approaches, which is breaking out of the rationalist-utilitarian paradigm, is the theory of 'democratic peace', originally developed by Immanuel Kant, but now an integral part of IR theorizing (esp. Russett 1990, 1993; Doyle 1997; Oneal/Russett 2001 and Russett/Oneal 2001). The main argument holds that democracies prefer peace to war because of peoples' basic preservation instinct and their unwillingness to maintain costly military armies (Russett 1990, 1993). With respect to alliances, democracies have certainly better prospects for developing long-lasting, friendly relationships (Risse-Kappen 1995, 1996; Starr 1997). NATO and the EU are the best examples for this argument.

However, this approach – as all the others that have been explicated before – stop where *social constructivist theories* start; while focusing on perceptions of states and norm-guided behaviour, liberalism as well as institutionalism neglect the interactive moment that is inherent in any social relationship, even on the interstate level. In contrast, constructivist theorizing recognizes that international reality is a social construction driven by collective understandings emerging from social interaction. The principal quality of structure, then, consists of the *meaning* ascribed to it by the agents whose practice reproduces and changes it (see especially the version formulated by Wendt 1999; also Adler 2005). In a similar vein, constructivist theorizing focuses on intersubjectively shared ideas, or *culture*. It differs from the approaches mentioned before because in these theories collective interest is assumed as pre-given and hence exogenous to social interaction (see the critique in Wendt 1994: 389; Ruggie 1998: 118-119). In contrast, we will take constructivist arguments as a starting point and maintain that social interaction ultimately does have transformative effects on interests and identity, because continuous interaction is likely to influence intersubjective meanings.[1]

Especially Alexander Wendt, in his 1999 monograph *Social Theory of International Politics* (STIP) has claimed to present a theory of structural change that moves beyond previous attempts, most prominently Kenneth Waltz's structural realism (1979). Several authors have, however, blamed Wendt for constricting structural change to shifts between different kinds of systemic culture (Drulák 2001), what Wendt calls Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian cultures (Wendt 1999). Hence, this paper takes Wendt's constructivist insights as a source of an ontological as well as epistemological discussion of what international politics actually is and how it can be studied. It will do so by referring to poststructuralist methodological insights. Poststructuralism will first and foremost be understood as a method of reading, while postmodernism is a far more ambiguous term, delineating a particular historical epoch or movement in a number of social sciences, philosophy, arts and history. At the centre

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[1] The term 'intersubjectivity', frequently used by constructivists, is equivalent to that of 'common knowledge', which is used in everyday language. Both refer to the beliefs held by individuals about each other.

of poststructuralism stand the concepts of truth and power. Going back to the different theoretical roots of de Saussure, Barthes, Foucault and Derrida, poststructuralists maintain that both concepts are reciprocally associated (Walker 1993). A central argument holds that language transports the knowledge and ideas that constitute a culture and thereby exercises enormous power. Its power becomes even more apparent when we consider that language is not in any sense personal or private. As an individual, one might try to alter language, but this remains meaningless as long as others do not adopt these changes (Belsey 2002: 4-5). The question poststructuralism poses is then: Who controls meanings? Who controls language?

A number of authors have blamed Wendt for neglecting the inextricable link between the role of ideas/culture on the one hand, and language/discourse on the other (Brglez 2001; Smith 2000; Suganami 2001; Zehfuß 1998; Zehfuss 2002), and thus of having no concept of speech and communication. On the contrary, poststructuralists assert that actors' identities are essentially, though not exclusively, shaped and constituted linguistically. They are articulated and communicated through language (Shapcott 2001: 13). In a nutshell: What exists, exists because of language. Poststructuralists do not deny the existence of a physical world 'out there' (for a critique Wight 2006). They are, however, interested in how these 'things' and others are signified, in what goes on in language and the interface between words and culture.

The unconditional priority of universal structures in the sense of Claude Lévi-Strauss (Belsey 2002: 39-42) has given way to a concern with 'spatio-temporal process' in International Relations (Walker 1993). Significant insights have, however, been borrowed from other disciplines. As one prominent example, Norman Fairclough, a British linguist, can be credited with conceptualizing political communication as a type of social practice, instantiated through discourse (Fairclough 1989, 1992, 2003). Together with Austrian linguist Ruth Wodak, German socio-linguist Siegfried Jäger, American linguist Ron Scollon and Dutch discourse theorist Teun van Dijk, Fairclough belongs to a group of researchers who have established critical discourse analysis (CDA) in the field of linguistics and beyond. CDA 'studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context' (van Dijk 2001: 352).

Linking CDA with the theory of hegemony developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), I will aim to show how hegemonic discourses serve as the nexus between crises and cultural structures and how they make cultural change possible. After a brief discussion of recent constructivist endeavours in the next section, including Wendt's three anarchic cultures, to account for structural change in the international system, I will go on to present a conceptual framework combining insights from CDA and the theory of hegemony. Finally, I will sum up the major findings and recommendations for empirical research in the conclusion.

2. Towards a Theory of International Structural Change

2.1 Ideas, Culture and Language

Popular constructivist approaches to the study of international politics define culture as the totality of intersubjective structures in the international system (for a discussion Nabers 2005; 2006). Therefore, these strands argue, to understand systemic change, we have to identify changing intersubjective structures. This understanding has played a dominant role as a concept in the growing body of constructivist thinking in recent years; thus, it makes sense to scrutinize the most important contributions in the field. We are commencing with a critical appraisal of Alexander Wendt's STIP, since his is not only one of the most widely processed and reviewed constructivist works in the field (for a discussion see the volume edited by Guzzini/Leander 2006), but also makes use of a sophisticated concept of culture and is essential for gaining a constructivist understanding of culture and ideas in international politics. Wendt's theory offers intriguing insights into the ontological 'structure' of international politics. His basic level-of-analysis is the international system as an ideational construction that gives meaning to the material capabilities of states. The state itself remains an analytical concept in that it never really becomes visible: it consists of an aggregation of (governmental) individuals (Wendt 1999: 8-10; also Wendt 2004). According to Wendt, the nature of international relations is determined by the ideas and beliefs that states have about each other. This does not suggest that material power and interests are irrelevant, but rather that their implications and effects are constituted by the social structure of the system.

Step by step, Wendt develops a theory of the international system, of cooperation and conflict. Using institutionalist insights, he assumes that states initially engage in pro-communicative activities for egoistic reasons, e.g. because state goals cannot be pursued unilaterally. The argument depends on a mechanism of functional institutional efficiency in order to account for social change. On the other hand, his social constructivist model maintains that agents themselves are in process when they interact, which means that their very properties rather than just behaviours are at issue. Interdependence, common fate and a homogenous culture – what Wendt calls his 'master variables' – can in this sense be seen as 'independent variables' (a term that he circumvents), good for instigating states' engagement in communicative processes (Wendt 1999: Chapter 7).

These variables serve the purpose of setting off a state's engagement in communicative processes. Yet, they seem to be inadequate for explaining the erosion of egoistic identities over time and the creation of collective ones. International institutions are likely to be unstable if states are engaged by an on-going reckoning over whether norm-conformity serves their individual interests. Consequently, I will assume and develop more broadly later that identi-

ties and interests are a continuing outcome of interaction, not just an input into the communicative process, as for example the concept of 'rhetorical action' would have it.[2]

However, the question how identities and their corresponding interests are transformed in the cultural context in which they are embedded cannot be answered satisfactorily by just pointing to their endogenous character. One more question has to be asked in this context: What makes states change their respective standpoints in the communicative context? Interdependence, common fate and homogeneity can be 'efficient' causes of pro-communicative engagement, which will eventually lead to a transformation of state identities. But this process can only develop if states can overcome their anxiety of being cheated by those with whom they would identify. The principle of 'reflected appraisals' introduced into IR theory by Wendt is only a first step that helps us solve this problem. If one state treats the other as if it were a friend, then by this principle it is likely that this state internalises that belief (Wendt 1999: 327). Creating a basic confidence is therefore the fundamental problem of international identity-building. Wendt describes this process as 'complex learning' (Wendt 1999: 330-331): The political acts of the states that communicate with each other constitute signals about the role that one wants to play and about the corresponding role into which it wants to cast its opponent. If State B modifies its ideas because of State A's political action, then learning has taken place. If this is the case, the actors 'will get to know each other, changing a distribution of knowledge that was initially only privately held (a mere social structure) into one that is at least partly shared (a culture)' (Wendt 1999: 331). From a constructivist standpoint the mark of a completely internalized culture is that actors identify with it, and include the wishes, ideas, and intentions of others into their own ideas. If identity is nothing else than to have certain ideas about who one is in a given situation, then the sense of being part of a group 'is a social or collective identity that gives actors an interest in the preservation of their culture' (Ibid.: 337). Certainly, State A can also take the role of an egoist or cast State B in a position to be manipulated for the satisfaction of its own needs. Then this might threaten State B's needs, who will probably adopt an egoistic identity himself and act accordingly.

On the basis of his interactionist model, Wendt argues that endless conflict and war, as predicted by realists, is not the only logic of the international system as an anarchic structure. Even the tentative optimism of liberals about international institutions and deepening interdependence facilitating international cooperation within anarchy might not go far enough. To illustrate this, Wendt introduces three distinct cultures of the international system, Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian, which are constituted by certain ideas about the general con-

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[2]   While rhetorical action refers to 'the *strategic* use of arguments, communicative action is best characterized as the non-strategic, *appropriate* use of arguments' (Schimmelfennig 2004: 203).

dition of human association, norms of appropriate behaviour and specific roles constituting rivalling or collective identities, respectively (Wendt 1999: ch. 6; cf. also Wendt 2003).

Calling himself a 'positivist' (Wendt 1999: 39), Wendt derives three different hypotheses from his three 'cultures of anarchy', referring to different theoretical approaches to the study of the international system, and leading to different grand strategies. With Realism, one might expect the familiar arms race, conflict and war to be the dominating features of anarchy; with institutionalism, one might expect an independent role for international institutions and absolute gains seeking; with constructivism, or idealism, actors might have a well-developed sense of collective identity, each state identifying with the fate of the other.

Obviously, and somewhat puzzling amid the centrality of ideas in his theory, his work lacks a linguistically informed concept of agency (for a critique cf. Herborth 2004; Zehfuss 2002). The relationship between structure and agency remains unclear at some points. It seems as if the causal power of a static reality (a Hobbesian, Lockean or Kantian reality) guides states' behaviour. Although Wendt advocates the idea that his model 'can be readily extended to situations in which culture already exists' (Wendt 1999: 328), some authors contend that the underlying conservative nature of a cultural structure represents an impediment to change (e.g. Sáváry 2001). Given this critique, the leading questions of this paper become pressing: How can actors change their identities in a process of complex learning if one assumes that identities are embedded in pre-existing cultural structures? And how can culture itself change?

Wendt argues that culture is a self-fulfilling prophecy, which means that actors act on the basis of shared ideas, and this in turn strengthens and reproduces these ideas. However, he maintains that culture still leaves some potential for change (Wendt 1999: 42). He acknowledges that '[d]espite having a conservative bias, therefore, culture is always characterized by more or less contestation among its carriers, which is a constant resource of structural change' (Wendt 1999: 188). This is a tentative introduction of agency into a systemic theory. If we assume that cultural structures always exist through process between agents, then we have to go a step further and ask what process actually is about.

In the following, it will be argued that process is constituted by meaningful acts of social agents, and can thus only be grasped by analysing meaning. Then again, the question remains how meaning can be analyzed by social scientists. Wendt argues that social relationships are constituted by discursive structures (Wendt 1999: 84), and that contestation occurs through communication. Surprisingly though, his arguments offer no concept of language, as the major or – in poststructuralist terms – the only source of meaning (Zehfuß 1998; Zehfuss 2002; see also Guzzini/Leander 2001). Wendt's model of 'complex learning' does not rely on language and discourse, but seems to be reduced to physical gestures (Zehfuss 2002: 48).

At a closer look, however, the version of scientific realism that Wendt makes the basis of his theory neither precludes linguistically informed epistemology, nor does it restrict the choice of methodology in any way. Under his approach one might subsume both empirical realism, which refers to those material facts that are directly observable, and linguistic realism, referring to what is present (and thus observable) within discourses (Brglez 2001; Wolf 2003). His metatheoretical position, which contradicts poststructuralist views but does not exclude the analysis of discourses, basically says that there is a world out there that is independent of individual observers' minds (Wendt 1999: 51). If it is true that what we think exists has no bearing on what really exists (Wight 2006: 3), then why does Wendt maintain that phenomena normally seen as material, such as power, are actually constituted by ideas: 'And these ideas exist and have effects because of the discursive forms (norms, institutions, ideologies) in which they are embedded […]' (Wendt 2003: 495). At a prominent place in his Social Theory, Wendt even underlines the inextricable link between identities, culture, and discourse:

> Thinking depends logically on social relations, not just causally. Human beings think through culture. And since the structure of shared beliefs is ultimately a linguistic phenomenon, this means that language does not merely mediate thinking, it makes thinking possible (Wendt 1999: 175).

This is exactly the dominant view in poststructuralism, i.e. that language, not ideas or culture, makes thinking possible in the first instance; that language intervenes between human beings and their world, and that ideas and culture are the effect of language, not vice versa. Certainly, material conditions, such as the existence of nuclear capabilities, have both constraining and enabling effects on actors' behaviour and define the costs and benefits of alternative actions, as Wendt (2000) and Wight (2006) have emphasised. However, and here comes the crucial aspect for this study, 'in acknowledging the independent effects of material conditions it is also important not to lose sight of the discursive conditions that invest them with meaning' (Wendt 2000: 166, emphasis in original). The meaning of nuclear bombs in the hand of North Korea's dictator Kim Jong-il is different for China than for Japan due to different ideas about self and other. These ideas can only be studied as a linguistic phenomenon. Though pointing out the relevance of ideas, what is missing in Wendt's arguments is a discussion of epistemological questions (see also Kratochwil 2000). How do we get to know ideas? What is the relationship between ideas and language? Wendt does not offer a clear idea about how to study the international system, because he fails to develop a language-based research agenda. As Hayward Alker criticizes, 'not much is said [in Wendt's book] on how to fill in the large, nearly empty, more or less grey, boxes of his three cultural

ideal types of anarchic socialization practices' (Alker 2000: 146).[3] And Petr Drulák consequently poses the question whether Wendt's master variables actually work without reflexivity and communication (Drulák 2001: 371-373). Eventually, it is the communicative reflection of a group of actors that creates the "we"-feeling which is necessary for the development of a collective identity. What is missing in Wendt's work is an epistemological elaboration of the fact that it is language that constructs social reality. Meaningful language is never reducible to individual speakers. It is a social act. In the following, I will call this process discourse.

Studying discourse has gained rising attention in constructivist thinking. Prominent constructivists have also hinted at the importance of studying language, yet without further detailing a research program for studying international politics. Emanuel Adler, possibly among those who have gone the farthest towards developing a process-based communitarian approach to international relations by conceptualizing cognitive evolution as collective learning, emphasises 'language as the vehicle for the diffusion and institutionalization of ideas within and between communities, as a necessary condition for the persistence over time of institutionalized practices, and as a mechanism for the construction of social reality'. He adds that 'the communities around which knowledge evolves, which play a crucial role in the construction of social reality, are constituted by language' (Adler 2005: 13). In Adler's view, all communities are 'communities of discourse', as they are producers and subjects of discourse at the same time. Cognitive evolution, then, delineates social change as the reconstruction and institutionalisation of collective intersubjective structures, or what Adler calls 'epistemes' (Adler 2005: 21).

While Wendt at times offers a materialist version of power,[4] Adler accentuates the power inherent in 'speech acts, hegemonic discourses, dominant normative interpretations and identities, and moral authority' (Adler 2005: 14, 25), postulating a research program that reconstructs the process of discursive construction. He implicitly refers to the third dimension of Steven Lukes' famous definition of power. According to Lukes' classification, power is exercised if A can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do. The stress here is on the study of concrete, observable behaviour. It shifts the attention on behaviour in the making of decisions on issues over which there is an observable conflict of subjective interests. The second dimension of power looks at the de facto power of the members within a group

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[3] See also Krasner, 2000, who argues that Wendt's argument is unsupported by empirical data.

[4] 'In order for an interaction to succeed, in the sense that actors bring their beliefs enough into line that they can play the same game, each side tries to get the other to see things its way. […] This ability will vary from case to case and dyad to dyad. Not all Others are "significant" Others. But where there is an imbalance of relevant material capability social acts will tend to evolve in the direction favored by the more powerful' (Wendt 1999: 331).

in the decision making process. Lukes maintains that the rules within any decision making system naturally bias the mobilization of resources for competing for agenda formation against some individuals and groups versus others. Also, because in most cases only a small number of issues can be handled on any agenda at the same time, many items simply never make it on the agenda. This dimension of power therefore incorporates coercion, influence, authority, force and manipulation. One method of persuasion could be, for example, the threat to developing countries to lose access to trade. Third, A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his wants, beliefs and understandings about the world. In modern societies this takes place through the control of information, through the mass media, and through the process of socialisation. This third dimension – which is entirely neglected by rationalist approaches to the study of IR – refers to a process of what we would henceforth call discursive hegemony.

Regrettably, methodological questions of how to study the process of fixing meanings in discourses that produce social practices are conspicuously absent from Adler's as well as many other constructivist accounts. This is all the more surprising since constructivist thinking fits very well with language-centred epistemologies. Discourse theorist Jonathan Potter has maintained that the scientific realist's furniture argument – 'see this [bangs on a table]; you're not telling me that's a social construction' can be accepted as such, as constructivist arguments are not aimed at denying material reality, but at detecting the numerous ways in which material and social reality is linguistically constructed or undermined. IR as a social science is not about whether one can 'eat nuclear weapons' (Wight 2006: 153), but about the meaning of these nuclear weapons for international politics. The question then becomes: 'How are descriptions made to seem literal and factual?' (Potter 1996: 7).

It is exactly this question that is at the centre of the theory of hegemony, developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985). On the basis of their valuable insights, I will turn to the role of discourse and hegemony in the process of cultural change in the next two sections. Change will primarily be seen as caused by texts, in particular discourses, since they transport meanings and alter our knowledge about the world. Consequently, this study will concentrate on the part of social reality that is textually constructed, since texts convey much of the meaning the social world entails.

2.2 Hegemony, Crisis and Change

In their seminal work Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (1985), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe reformulated Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony in a way that takes language

as constitutive for politics. In his research, especially Laclau reconstructs Michel Foucault's work in order to eliminate all the non-discursive elements that are constitutive for the latter's theory. But he also uses Jacques Derrida's insights into deconstruction, combining it – at first sight illogically – with discourse analysis. Eventually, 'the outcome of one becomes the input of the other' (Andersen 2003: 56).

Laclau and Mouffe start by defining the social as a 'discursive space' and take a strict standpoint contra the positivist or naturalist paradigm. According to the theory of hegemony, there is nothing societal that is determined outside the discursive (Laclau 1977; Laclau/Mouffe 1985: 107; for a discussion also Norval 2004), which indicates that the social per se is discourse. As a result, any distinction between a linguistic and a behavioural element of social life is rejected. Taking poststructuralist thought in the tradition of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida as their starting point, they argue that the social is pervaded by undecidables rather than governed by structural determination. The incompleteness of social structures make political articulations possible in the first place; interests are entirely produced in the articulatory political process, in fact 'politico-hegemonic articulations retroactively create the interests they claim to represent' (Laclau/Mouffe 1985, Preface to the Second Edition: xi).

Referring to Hegel's modernity (in detail also Butler 2000), 'identity' is conceptualized as a precariously negative term, never closed in itself, but ephemeral in character and relying on the constant movement of differential relationships (Laclau/Mouffe 1985: 95). All identity – it has to be stressed – is relational, formed by social practices that link together a series of interrelated signifying elements. All principles and values, therefore, receive their meaning from relationships of difference and opposition. Laclau and Mouffe use the terms subject and 'subject position' within a discursive structure to describe this phenomenon. The subject is seen as an attempt to fill structural gaps, or subject positions, within a structure. Hence Laclau's (2000: 58) differentiation between identity and identification, unveiling a basic ambiguity at the heart of identity. The individual cannot completely identify with the subject position the discourse supplies, 'but is forced into filling the structural gaps through identification' (Andersen 2003: 52). Corresponding to poststructuralist traditions, subjects cannot be the very origin of meaning in social relations, because they are situated in a discursive space and certain conditions of possibility. As to the system or structure that evolves from these multi-directional correlations between subject positions, Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 106) explicate:

> Whoever says system says arrangement or conformity of parts in a structure which transcends and explains its elements. Everything is so necessary in it that modifications of the whole and of the details reciprocally condition one another.

This means that system and structure are in constant movement, and differential positions are never eternally fixed. Any particular subject position within a democratic polity is necessarily incomplete, and identity is therefore never able to achieve absolute determination. Being tied to a specific content, such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, history, nation or region, an identity becomes what it is by virtue of its relative position in an open structure of differential relationships. This means it is constituted by its difference from an infinite number of other identities (Laclau 1996; Butler 2000).

The incompleteness of agents' identities is what lies at the heart of any hegemonic process. Temporarily though, the constellation 'by which a certain particularity assumes the representation of a universality entirely incommensurable with it, is what we call a hegemonic relation' (Laclau/Mouffe 1985, Preface to the Second Edition: xiii). The tension between universality and particularity remains unresolvable; it is highly political (Laclau 2000; Norval 2004), never total and always reversible. In that sense, hegemony has to be distinguished from domination, which denotes the (often juridical) command that is exercised by a state or government (Laclau 2000: 47). Yet, the suggested impossibility of closure entails an impossibility of society (Laclau/Mouffe 1985: 122), calling into question the very foundation of classical structuralism.

On the other hand, if subject positions and identities are indeed purely differential, the whole system of differences is related to any single act of signification, which in turn requires us to think of the system as a closed one. Put differently, the very notion of particularity presupposes the existence of a totality. Otherwise the structure of the system would be infinitely dispersed with no signification possible at all. Logically, however, a totality requires limits. The question is what lies beyond the limit, which can only be one more difference. Then again, the limit between internal and external structure would become impossible to identify. Laclau and Mouffe therefore maintain that dominant interpretative frameworks result from the specific dialectic relationship between what they call the logics of antagonism and equivalence (Laclau/Mouffe 1985: chapter 3; Laclau n.y.). They see a way out of the logical dilemma by claiming that the nature of the relationship beyond the limit of the system is one of exclusion: it is not just one more element in a structure of differences, but one in an antagonistic relationship to the inside. What follows from this is that there are relations of equivalence between in-group actors, which create antagonisms to other social groups. The simplicity of this conjecture is exemplified by the verdict 'to be something is always not to be something else' (Laclau/Mouffe 1985: 128), which also implies that equivalence is not synonymous with identity: equivalence presupposes difference, but can eventually lead to the formation of collective identities. Thus, in Laclau's and Mouffe's view, contradictory forces form society. These forces construct social reality in different ways.

Whereas the logic of antagonism accentuates difference, the logic of equivalence subverts it (Laclau/Mouffe 1985: 122, 127). Antagonisms are external to society; they mark the limits of objective society, thereby preventing a fully closed cultural structure. Any form of consensus amongst the members of an institution is, in other words, the result of a temporary hegemonic constellation relying on these two logics.

In linguistic terms, the incompletion of any subject-formation is linked to a political contestation over signifiers. With Laclau and Mouffe, '[t]he structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call discourse' (Laclau/Mouffe 1985: 105). Discourse is defined as a structure, but the structure never reaches full closure. Politics exists because structures are never complete; if a structure was fully closed, politics would have found its final designation. Every object, every subject position is constituted by discourse and depends on specific discursive conditions of possibility. Discourse constitutes culture, which consists of the meanings its subjects produce and reproduce. Talking about 'Europe' or 'Asia', for example, presupposes a relation of equivalence, which is not instituted outside some discursive social space, but as 'a real force which contributes to the moulding and constitution of social relations' (Laclau/Mouffe 1985: 110; Laclau 2000: 55). Any identity remains purely relational, is not self-defined, and by relying on an external antagonist it can never be closed or fully constituted in itself. In arguing that both a fully constituted self and a fully constituted other is impossible, Laclau and Mouffe implicitly reiterate the common poststructuralist argument that ultimate meanings are unattainable, while at the same time acknowledging the possibility of partial fixations. Without these, the very meaning of difference, antagonism and equivalence would become futile. Hegemony rests on the assumption that any discourse tries to dominate the field of discursivity. Referring to Lacan, Laclau and Mouffe call the temporary fixation of meanings, the construction of a discursive centre, nodal points (Laclau/Mouffe 1985: 112). Nodal points are partial fixations, never conclusively arresting the flow of differences. Summing up their argument, they maintain (Laclau/Mouffe 1985: 113, emphasis in original):

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

Structure is here defined as discourse; the social and culture are constituted entirely within discourse. What this brings about is a logical difference to the thinking of Michel Foucault, as any distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices or the establishment of a thought/reality dichotomy has to be called into question. While Foucault assumes a dualism

of discourse and reality, overlooking the fact that even houses, streets and cars only exist as long as they are and continue to be embedded in discourses (for a critique Jäger 2001; Potter 1996: 87-88), principles, norms, institutions, and techniques of production are conceptualised as discursive articulations in the theory of hegemony; the opposition between realism and idealism that is advocated by Wendt (1999) becomes blurred. The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 have been visible and audible to a TV audience all over the world; they existed as events, independently of the spectators will. However, whether they are constructed as 'evil deeds', a 'crime against humanity', 'God's will' or an 'act of war' depended upon the nature of the discourse that was triggered by these 'events'. Objects like these are entirely constituted by discursive practices. Moreover, human beings, the 'human subject', 'man' and 'woman', are constructed differently in different religious, ideological or constitutional discourses. Finally, any teleological drive of the system remains elusive. While Wendt sees a world state as 'inevitable' but confesses that 'the speed with which this one will be realized is historically contingent' (Wendt 2003: 491), Laclau and Mouffe dispute an inherent finalistic logic, accentuating instead the discursive process by which certain regularities establish differential positions (Laclau/Mouffe 1985: 109).

Any position in this system of differential positions can become the locus of an antagonistic relationship, creating, on the other hand, numerous chains of equivalence. On that basis, structural change becomes possible, or more bluntly, change is a constantly working mechanism deeply ingrained in any society, as no identity is closed in itself but is submitted to continuous displacements in terms of combinations and substitutions.

At the beginning, hegemonic projects are characterized by articulatory practices (elements) that have not become differential positions (moments) in a discourse (Laclau/Mouffe 1985: 105; 134). Hegemony, then, can be seen as a response to an organic crisis (a term borrowed from Gramsci), '[a] conjuncture where there is a generalized weakening of the relational system defining the identities of a given social or political space, and where, as a result there is a proliferation of floating elements' (Laclau/Mouffe 1985: 136). An 'empty' or 'floating signifier' is often defined as one with a highly variable, indistinct or non-existent signified. If language as a system of articulatory relations is seen as incomplete, this would entail that signifiers and the signified would not conclusively be attached to each other. Instead, Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen shows, referring to Lacan, 'how the sliding of the signifier across the signified forces the signifier to step into, or down onto, the level of the signifed' (Andersen 2003: 53). By influencing that which they signify, signifiers exercise enormous power. This happens when, for example, North Korea announces it has tested a nuclear device. The signifier steps down into the signified by giving the event a much broader meaning: North Korea's nuclear bomb comes to signify the enslavement of the international community by so-called 'rogue

states', the defects of the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and the collective security system of the United Nations in general.

Floating signifiers may also mean different things to different people: they may stand for various or even any signified; and they may represent whatever their authors want them to represent. A good example for this process is the language of the 'war on terror', where empty signifiers such as 'freedom', 'liberty' and 'war on terror' structure the discursive field and make political decisions thinkable (Laclau 2000: 56-58; Nabers 2006). Empty signifiers aim to universalise particular meanings, thereby designating an 'empty place, a void which can be filled only by the particular, but which, through its very emptiness, produces a series of crucial effects in the structuration/destructuration of social relations' (Laclau 2000: 58; emphasis in original). Discursive hegemony therefore resembles a battle over which signifiers are tied to which signified. Floating or empty signifiers play a crucial role in this game. They are the only signifiers capable of closing the gaps in an articulatory structure. The more specific the content of a signifier becomes, the more it will be contested, which leads to the failure of a hegemonic project. The failure to fill the empty space, the breakdown of the hegemonic constellation, provides the basis for the fullness of a community as a future promise: identity-building, in consequence, resembles an open-ended hegemonic struggle (Butler 2000; Laclau 2000). Power and the ability to rule will thus depend on an actor's skill to present his own particular worldview as compatible with the communal aims. 'Pure' empty signifiers are impossible , since total coincidence of the universal with the particular is unattainable. This, however, is the nucleus of the democratic project: Although no agent can logically claim to speak for the whole society, doing so lies at the heart of all politics and can be seen as the essence of the hegemonico-discursive operation (Laclau 2000).

This process works best in a situation of disintegration and indeterminacy of articulations of different identities (Laclau/Mouffe 1985: 7, 13; Laclau 1977: 103). Previous political logics have been put into question by a crisis, while more and more actors open themselves up for innovative discourses, and hegemonic strategies can be successful. The old political structure is dislocated, and the subject has no positive identity. The network of existing social structures is increasingly considered an obstacle on the path to one's 'true self'; the evolving hegemonic discourse, on the other hand, reinforces a specific actor's identity crisis by offering alternative identity concepts. This transition is a highly complex venture, encompassing a fundamental reconstruction of existing subject positions. As an ideal type, it can be summed up as follows:

(1) At the beginning there is the crisis, an external catastrophe like a major war, a grave financial or economic crisis, humanitarian catastrophe or terrorist assault, that might

weaken dominant discourses, i.e prevailing perceptions of reality, opening up cultural borders.

(2) Alternative discourses start to compete in their interpretation of the crisis. Sooner or later, one predominant interpretation will evolve, which institutes the framework that determines what action is appropriate and what action is inappropriate to end the predicament (Laclau 1990: 64).

(3) Old identities tend to dissolve with the construction of newly established dominant interpretative frameworks.[5]

(4) The new cultural structure will then generate new kinds of political action along the lines of the dominant interpretative framework (cf. also Laclau 1977). Again, it has to be noted here that the evolving societal structure is never fully constituted and hegemonic interventions are possible at any time.

The battle between discourses to become the leading interpretative structure actually tends to reveal the configuration of power relations in a given historical moment. Power is uneven,[6] not stable or static, but is rearticulated continuously, and new conceptual perspectives are opened up by subversive practices (Smith 1998: 57; Butler 2000: 14). Ernesto Laclau argues that once a discourse reaches the stage of establishing a dominant perception of reality for all those participating in the communicative process, it reveals a lot about the course of action in collective identity formation. If the same 'reality' is reflected in the speech acts of all interacting agents, one can call it a shared culture. Specific cultural forms like norms, rules, (political) institutions, conventions, ideologies, customs, and laws are all influenced by this process. Different actors are competing for hegemony by offering their specific 'systems of narration' as a compensatory framework (Laclau 1977: 103), trying to fix the meaning of social relations. Hegemony therefore reproduces our daily life; it starts to be hegemonic when our everyday understanding of social relations and the world as a whole starts to change according to the framework that is set by the hegemonic discourse. It is an act of power because it makes the world intelligible.

Referring to Steven Lukes' (1974) work, an actor exercises power over another actor by influencing, shaping or determining his wants, beliefs and understandings about the world. It can be legitimately argued that a successful hegemonic project must be based on this third dimension of power. Power has to be internalized in the intersubjective representations of

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[5] Wendt at one point (Wendt 1999: 264) introduces the concept of the 'tipping point', which he considers to be the threshold beyond which structural change becomes possible. At this point, according to Wendt, the representations of individual actors take the logic of the system, making structural change possible. For a critique see also Drulák 2001: 369.

[6] As Laclau (2000: 54) aptly put it: 'A power which is total is no power at all'.

relevant other actors. Eventually, this is the basis of the hegemonic project and the premise for successful collaboration between the hegemon and his followers. It is to Laclau's merit to have reintroduced the term hegemony in contemporary debates concerning problems of political power, authority, and culture. In a nutshell, hegemony means nothing more but the discursive struggle between political actors over the assertion of their particular representations of the world as having a universal significance.

This view of politics stands in stark contrast to Jürgen Habermas's model of 'deliberative democracy', most elegantly developed in his two-volume 'Theory of Communicative Action' (Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns) (Habermas 1995a, 1995b). While both approaches claim to present a particular version of 'radical democracy', avoid reducing the political process to the expression of exogenously formed interests and identities, and highlight their constitution and reconstitution through 'debate in the public sphere', Laclau and Mouffe – contra Habermas – maintain that any final reconciliation, in terms of complete rationality, is unattainable. Instead, they argue that conflict and division are essential elements of a functioning democracy; to think otherwise would put the whole democratic project at risk. Any form of consensus, thus, has to be seen as the result of a hegemonic articulation, which is never total and always threatened by an 'outside', antagonistic social force. Consequently, Laclau, in company with Judith Butler and Slavoy Žižek, distances himself from Habermas's conjecture of universality as a premise of the speech act and his assumption that politics is constituted by rational actors (Butler/Laclau/Žižek 2000: 3).

As to deconstruction, Laclau actually aims to combine it with discourse analysis. While deconstruction is about retracting differences by demonstrating that they are invalid, discourse analysis provides deconstruction with differences to be deconstructed; on the other hand, deconstruction serves as the basis for hegemonic discourses:

> Hegemony requires deconstruction: without the radical structural undecidability that the deconstructive intervention brings about, many strata of social relations appear as essentially linked by necessary logics and there would be nothing to hegemonies. But deconstruction also requires hegemony, that is, a theory of the decision taken in an undecidable terrain: without a theory of decision, that distance between structural undecidability and actuality would remain untheorised (Laclau 1996: 59-60).

We will now have to consider the way in which hegemonic interventions are discursively constructed. In concurrence with the theory of hegemony presented here, we need to put emphasis on articulations instituting relations between actors and modifying their identities. At the centre of the following methodological discussion of discursive change will be the approach that is known as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), mainly referring to the in-

sights of Norman Fairclough and Siegfried Jäger, who have argued that the theory of hegemony could be operationalised for textual analysis and to deepen our understanding of social change.

2.3 Language, Discourse and Interpretation

The focus of the following methodological discussion will be on language and forms of language use, staying 'totally clear of any relationship to what people really think. [The analysis is] not interested in inner motives, in interests or beliefs; it studies something public, that is how meaning is generated and structured […]' (Waever 1995: 254). The speaker is no more than what he says at a particular moment, or, in semiologist Roland Barthes' words: 'Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as I is nothing other than the instance saying I' (Barthes 1977: 145).

It is, however, possible to generate broader meanings of what is said by referring to methods such as intertextual and contextual analysis. In the poststructuralist tradition, we will, for example, be concerned with understanding what is present by asking what is not present in texts (Potter 1996: 70). CDA, the strand of discourse analysis that probably comes closest to both this postulate and to Laclau's and Mouffe's theory, and provides a fruitful ground for a methodological extension of their thinking, understands discourse as 'an element of social life which is closely interconnected with other elements' (Fairclough 2003: 3). Although various strands of CDA exist, Fairclough and Wodak (1997: 271-280) summarize eight important features:

1. The focus lies on social problems;
2. Power relations are discursive;
3. Society and culture are constituted by discourse;
4. Discourse transports actors' ideologies;
5. Discourse is historical;
6. The link between text and society is mediated;
7. Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory;
8. Discourse is a form of social action.

Overall, language is seen as social practice, and a particular interest is given to the relationship between language and power (Wodak 2001: 1-2). Empirically, the approach of CDA is concerned with structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, social inequality and control as conveyed by language. It accepts the claim of an ultimate impossibility of fixing meanings by speech and recognizes the role of hegemony as a process of temporal fixation. Moreover, it highlights discursive differences (Wodak 2001: 11). In that sense, it concurs with the theory of hegemony, and some theorists directly build on the insights gained from

Laclau and Mouffe, extending their theory by linking discourse analysis with text analysis. Siegfried Jäger follows Laclau in denying any social reality that is determined outside the discursive (Jäger 2001), and Norman Fairclough likewise claims that every social practice has a semiotic element (Fairclough 2001, 2003). While some strands of CDA do not entirely focus on texts, spoken or written, as objects of inquiry, others emphasize the character of discourses as 'sui generis material realities' (Jäger 2001: 36). In essence, we only make things into things by providing them with meaning. Even materialisations like 'street', 'house', 'car', but also 'president', 'prime minister' and 'member of parliament' are consequences of past speech and/or preceding discourses and are as such materializations of human thought. Whenever a discourse changes, these materialisations not only lose their prior meanings, but their whole identity changes. Differences and alterations in power are themselves encoded and determined by discourse: 'language indexes power, expresses power, is involved where there is contention over and a challenge to power' (Wodak 2001: 11).

In that sense, it supplies the researcher with a sophisticated means for unveiling differences in power in social hierarchical structures. The notion of context that seems crucial for CDA is misleading in this regard, as it suggests that socio-psychological, political, institutional and ideological factors are somehow situated outside the discursive. They are not. To make this clear, Jäger, criticising Foucault, draws a circle between discourse and 'reality', that gives the former clear priority:

> I have the impression that the difficulties in the determination of the dispositive are related to a failure to determine the mediation between discourse (what is said/what has been said), non-discursive practices (activities) and manifestations (products/objects). If I […] regard these manifestations as materializations/activities of knowledge (discourse) and non-discursive practices as the active implementation of knowledge, a context can be produced that will probably solve many of the problems (Jäger 2001: 45-46).[7]

When people communicate with each other, they negotiate about meanings. Through their communication, they produce and reproduce reality. Fundamental to this approach discourse must essentially be understood as constituting the social. Most helpful in this regard is the work of Siegfried Jäger (1999, 2001) and Norman Fairclough (esp. 1989, 1992, 2003). Jäger (1999) conceptualises discourse as the flow of text and speech through time and offers a very detailed research programme that allows for a proper empirical analysis in several steps. Fairclough, on the other hand, offers an in-depth analysis of social change. Texts are, according to Fairclough, 'sensitive barometers of social processes, movement and diversity, and textual analysis can provide particularly good indicators of social change' (Fairclough

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[7]   The dispositive, as defined by Michel Foucault, 'covers discourses, institutions, architectural institutions, reglemented decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral or philantropic teachings, in brief, what is said and what is not said' (Foucault 1978: 119-120).

1999: 204). Emphasizing the social character of texts, methodologically the dimension of their external relations will be of primary concern, i.e. the question of how elements of other texts are 'intertextually' incorporated and interpreted, how other texts are alluded to, assumed and dialogued with (Fairclough 2003: 36, 47). The basic idea behind this methodology lies in the poststructuralist idea that arguments do not originate in the thoughts of individual people. Speakers do not create their thoughts in the first instance, but are embedded in a complex socio-linguistic history. Texts, in a nutshell, are always part of a bigger picture. Intertextual analysis sheds light on the interrelation of texts with present and past discourses, but at the same time draws attention to how texts may transform society (Fairclough 1999: 184-185). Significant initial questions to be answered refer to the texts and voices included in the texts to be analyzed and to notable absences. Furthermore, the most apparent assumptions of the textual body shall be identified. Assumptions comprise forms of implicitness such as presuppositions, logical implications or entailments, and implicatures (Fairclough 2003: 40). They are an important issue with respect to expressing fellowship, community and solidarity in a group of countries. All these notions depend upon meanings which are shared, and the progress of hegemonic relationships include the capacity of certain actors to shape their nature and content. In detail, three main types of assumptions will be differentiated (Fairclough 2003: 55-56): existential assumptions, referring to assumptions about what exists, propositional assumptions, designating assumptions about what is or can be or will be the case, and finally value assumptions, denoting what is good or desirable.

This will make it possible to identify relations of equivalence and difference in the texts to be used for the analysis. Fairclough has argued that Laclau's conceptualization of hegemony and his logics of equivalence and difference can be operationalized for critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003: 88-89, 100-103). Equivalence and difference correspond to the concepts of combination and substitution in linguistic theories. While relations of equivalence are likely to be semantic relations of addition, elaboration, synonymy and subordination (hyponymy), relations of difference are set up as semantic relations of contrast. Critical linguists also call this mechanism 'overlexicalization', meaning that antagonists are lexicalized in various ways.

An example for this practice is the term 'evil', which is employed in the American antiterror-discourse to label the enemy, whilst its origin lies in Christian vocabulary. Concepts like these address knowledge structures of recipients in order to unveil causal relationships, spatio-temporal attributions und specific thematic correlations. Any vocalization may include attributes or refer to circumstances which are implied, but are not made explicit (Linke/Nußbaumer/Portmann 1994: 233). It is therefore possible to differentiate between a claimed statement (conclusion) and a presupposed statement (argument). Both statements are linked through a closing rule (fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Conclusion, argument and closing rule

Argument—————————————————————————**Conclusion**

closing rule
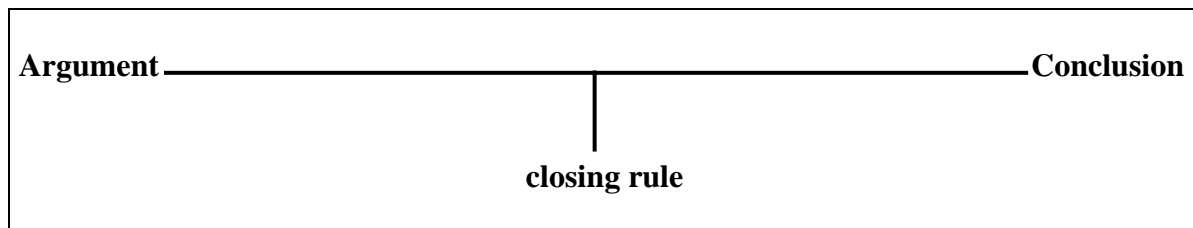
The logical relationship between argument and conclusion is often generated by means of binary constructions. It is only by reference to an outside Other, that identity constructions of the Self become achievable. David Domke (2004) quite intriguingly exemplifies the power of such binary constructions in the American anti-terror discourse, referring to the president's use of the terms good vs. evil and security vs. peril. Implicit connotations, e.g. headscarf as a symbol for Islam, serve the same task. On that basis it becomes possible to construct a rope-ladder of differences and predications (fig. 2), with binary constructions located on the horizontal axis (Nabers 2005; 2006).

Fig. 2: Rope-ladder of differences and predications
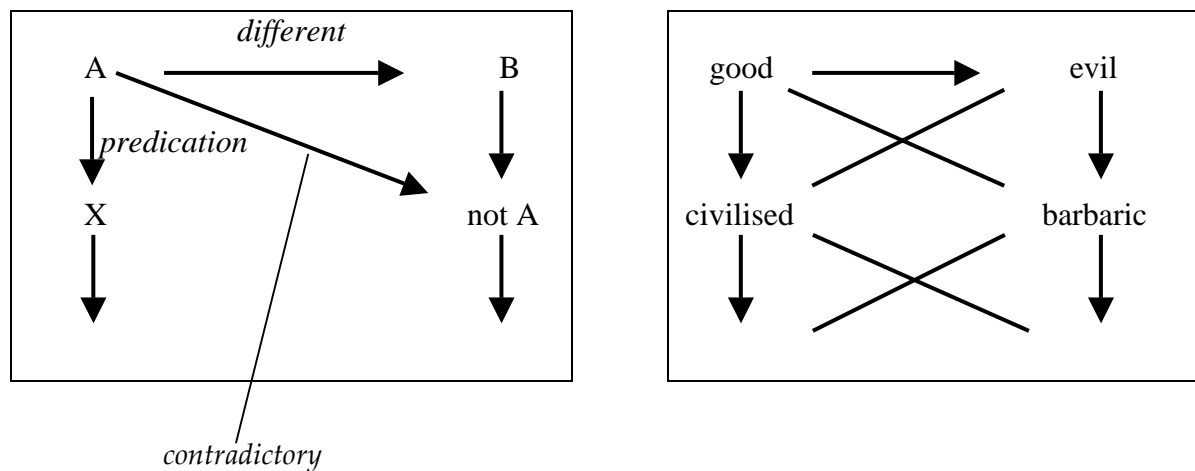
The initial terms good vs. evil are denoted by a chain of further predications. Relations of difference in a discourse resemble a rope-ladder, which makes it possible to capture broader meanings of discourses, i.e. discursive macro structures. According to Fairclough (2003: 41-2), there are several ways in which texts potentially deal with difference in Laclau's and Mouffe's sense, referring to

- the discovery of difference in terms of dialogue with others;
- the emphasis of difference through conflict and an open struggle over meanings, norms and power;
- the effort to resolve or surmount difference;

- a bracketing of difference by focussing on commonality, solidarity and identity, and finally
- the normalization and recognition of difference through consensus.

In concurrence with Laclau, Fairclough is interested in the question of how particulars in a discourse come to signify universals, in particular how divergent identities come to be claimed as collective. On that basis, we will ask the following questions (see also Jackson 2005; Fairclough 1992; Jäger 2001):

- What assumptions underlie the language in the text?
- How are elements of other texts "intertextually" incorporated and interpreted?
- How stable and internally consistent are the examined texts?
- How are new dominant interpretative frameworks generated?

While an analysis of a domestic discourse (e.g. Larsen 1997) on a particular topic faces the problem of a boundless amount of available actors and sources, the pool is much easier to survey if limited to governments. The study concentrates on 'typical' speech-acts of top government officials, representative declarations and communiqués. The textual samples used in the empirical analysis will primarily serve to answer the questions raised above, rather than being subject to detailed textual analysis in the sense of CDA, which would include a detailed analysis of syntax and grammar.[8] The analysis will instead put emphasis on argumentation and focus on discourse strategies in dialogue between different governments on issues of identity formation.

That is the task we are facing in the empirical analysis of international politics, which will put political discourse under critical scrutiny with regards to its impact on how particulars come to assume universal meanings. Whilst the method can be employed for all kinds of processes in international politics, it is not limited to any particular level-of-analysis. That this study prioritises the level of the international system does not mean that domestic or transnational change cannot be analysed within the framework.

While CDA must essentially be seen as an open-ended research process (Fairclough 1996), a particular empirical analysis is 'complete' and offers significant scientific results when the analysis of new linguistic devices reveal no new findings (Jäger 2001; Meyer 2001; Fairclough 2003). This requires detailed documentation. The empirical analysis will be conducted in the mode of a hermeneutic circle – the meaning of textual samples will only be comprehensible in the context of the whole discourse, while the discourse can only be approached from its single, intertextually connected components.

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[8]   Van Dijk (2001) suggests that the analysis should concentrate on linguistic markers such as stress and intonation, word order, lexical style, coherence, local semantic moves such as disclaimers, topic choice, schematic organisation, rhetorical figures, syntactic structures, propositional structures, turn takings, repairs and hesitation.

3 Critique and the path to empirical research

The key insights into the mutual entanglement of universality and particularity offered by the theory of hegemony can be useful in answering some of the questions related to change in the international system, be it in the economic, security, environmental, economic or social realm. The concept of hegemony shows that many of the traditional IR concepts – power, system, structure and sovereignty – can be of use if their implications are clear. They acquire their meaning in particular relational contexts and are always limited by other, often contradictory logics. None of them is absolutely valid, not even the military or economic preponderance of the United States after the end of the Cold War. Quite the reverse is true: superior material capabilities, as suggested by realist theories, have no intrinsic logic. At the end of the day, '[i]t is only through negativity, division and antagonism that a formation can constitute itself as a totalizing horizon' (Laclau/Mouffe 1985: 144); only under these circumstances can a chain of equivalences gain hegemonic character.

In an empirical investigation of collective identity formation we would have to break down the concepts employed by the theory of hegemony. Crucial for the empirical investigation is Laclau's argument that the notion of the political is the instituting moment of society, which brings with it the incompletion of all acts of political institutionalization. In that context, Žižek's analogy of the state is intriguing: He not only suggests that the state per se can never achieve total identity, but that it would rather be a religious community than a state (Žižek 1999: 177). In other words: Institutionalization, be it on a national or a regional level, is an on-going process; no identity is fully closed and hence apt to hegemonic interventions. These interventions are likely to be successful when previous political logics have been put into question by a crisis. In consequence, hegemony represents the never ending effort to generate fixations of a discourse.

The framework is able to provide ontological as well as epistemological and methodological insights into processes of identity-building in international affairs. For this to become possible an anthropomorphisation of agents is required, since otherwise the analysis would suffer from a lack of agency. The most suitable agent for our task seems to be the state, since states, as Wendt (1999: 10) has argued, are indeed real agents. Without attributing corporate agency to the state, analyses of international politics would be per definitionem impossible. Using the framework provided in this paper as a starting point, it is possible to conceptualise the state as a speaking agent in an empirical analysis of crisis and change in international politics.

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