

Approaches and Theories

Laclau and Mouffe's Theory

Laclau and Mouffe have constructed their theory by combining and modifying two major theoretical traditions, Marxism and structuralism. Marxism provides a starting point for thinking about the social, and structuralism provides a theory of meaning. Laclau and Mouffe fuse these traditions into a single poststructuralist theory in which the whole social field is understood as a web of processes in which meaning is created. First, we will outline their theory of the creation of meaning and their concept of 'discourse'.

A discourse is understood as the fixation of meaning within a particular domain. All signs in a discourse are *moments*. They are the knots in the fishing-net, their meaning being fixed through their differences from one another ('differential positions'). A discourse is formed by the partial fixation of meaning around certain *nodal points* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 112). A nodal point is a privileged sign around which the other signs are ordered; the other signs acquire their meaning from their relationship to the nodal point.

A discourse is established as a totality in which each sign is fixed as a moment through its relations to other signs (as in a fishing-net). This is done by the *exclusion* of all other possible meanings that the signs could have had: that is, all other possible ways in which the signs could have been related to one another. Thus a discourse is a reduction of possibilities.

It is an attempt to stop the sliding of the signs in relation to one another and hence to create a unified system of meaning. All the possibilities that the discourse excludes Laclau and Mouffe call *the field of discursivity* (1985). The field of discursivity is a reservoir for the 'surplus of meaning' produced by the articulatory practice – that is, the meanings that each sign has, or has had, in other discourses, but which are excluded by the specific discourse in order to create a unity of meaning. the field of discursivity is understood as everything outside the discourse, all that the discourse excludes.

Elements are the signs whose meanings have not yet been fixed; signs that have multiple, potential meanings (i.e. they are *polysemic*). Using this concept, we can now reformulate the concept of discourse: a discourse attempts to transform elements into moments by reducing their polysemy to a fully fixed meaning. In the terms of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, the discourse establishes a *closure*, a temporary stop to the fluctuations in the meaning of the signs. But the closure is never definitive: 'The transition from the "elements" to the "moments" is never entirely fulfilled' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

The discourse can never be so completely fixed that it cannot be undermined and changed by the multiplicity of meaning in the field of discursivity. For instance, in the discourse of Western medicine, the inroads made by acupuncture

have led to the modification of the dominant medical understanding of the body in order to accommodate ‘networks of energy’.

Nodal points are the privileged signs around which a discourse is organised. But these signs are empty in themselves. As mentioned, the sign ‘body’ does not acquire detailed meaning until it is inserted in a particular discourse. Therefore, the sign ‘body’ is also an element. Actually, discourse theory has a term for those elements which are particularly open to different ascriptions of meaning, and that is *floating signifiers* (Laclau

1990). Floating signifiers are the signs that different discourses struggle to invest with meaning in their own particular way. Nodal points are floating signifiers, but whereas the term ‘nodal point’ refers to a point of crystallisation within a specific discourse, the term ‘floating signifier’ belongs to the ongoing struggle between different discourses to fix the meaning of important signs.

Discourse, then, can be understood as a type of structure in a Saussurian sense – a fixation of signs in a relational net. But, in contrast to the Saussurian tradition whereby structure covered all signs in a *permanent* closure, discourse, for Laclau and Mouffe, can never be total in the Saussurian sense. There are always other meaning potentials which, when actualised in specific articulations, may challenge and transform the structure of the discourse. Thus the discourse is a *temporary* closure: it fixes meaning in a particular way, but it does not dictate that meaning is to be fixed exactly in that way forever. In Laclau and Mouffe’s terms, articulations are contingent interventions in an undecidable terrain. That means that articulations constantly shape and intervene in the structures of meaning in unpredictable ways. Discourses are incomplete structures in the same undecidable terrain that never quite become completely structured.

Discourse Structure as Social Practice

Structuralism has often been criticised for being unable to account for change. Stereotypical structuralists may map the structure at a given time and again at another point in time and find out that the structure has changed in the meantime, but they do not have any tools to explain that change. This is because their object of study in the sphere of language is restricted to *langue*, the underlying structure, whereas *parole*, the practice of langue, is neglected. If practice is not investigated, it is hard to explain where the structure comes from and what can change it.

Discourse analysis, although indebted to structuralism, has striven not to inherit this problem. Poststructuralism takes account of change by virtue of its premise that the structure is never fixed as meanings can only be pinned down partially and temporarily; the structure is continuously dependent on how it is crystallised in practice. In this way, poststructuralism tries to fuse the two levels, *langue* and *parole*, structure and practice, into a single process, whereby the structure, rather

than being an underlying entity, exists only in the discursive practices that reproduce or transform it.

Among our approaches, Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory is the most thoroughly poststructuralist, but the other approaches also have a dualist view of discursive practice. Fairclough's key concepts for analysis of these processes are 'intertextuality' and 'interdiscursivity'. By looking at how specific texts draw on earlier meaning formations and how they mix different discourses, he investigates how discourses are reproduced and – his top priority – how they are changed.

Fairclough's critical discourse analysis that is the most explicitly interested in studying change. The concept of 'articulation' in Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory has, by and large, the same theoretical effect as Fairclough's concept of intertextuality. An articulation is a combination of elements that gives them a new identity, Laclau and Mouffe propose. Articulation, then, conceptualises change. But it conceptualises reproduction as well. Every discursive practice is an articulation since no practice is an exact repetition of earlier structures. Every apparent reproduction involves an element of change, however minimal. Like Fairclough's concepts of intertextuality and interdiscursivity, 'articulation' encapsulates the point that discursive practice both draws on, and destabilises, earlier patterns.

Discursive psychology emphasises the unstable relations between discourses. Discursive psychologists analyse how people selectively draw on different discursive resources in different social contexts. Again, the focus is the way in which prevailing structures both provide a basis for, *and* are challenged and transformed in, language use. Discursive psychologists analyse how people draw on specific discursive resources in social interaction, thus presupposing that certain discourses prevail in the background. But some discursive psychologists can be criticised for not operating explicitly with a level comparable to the order of discourse. The order of discourse exists only by implication in their analyses. It seems as if some discursive psychologists approach the opposite extreme in order to avoid seeing discourses as reified and impersonal phenomena where people's agency vanishes – that is, in order to avoid Foucault's and Laclau and Mouffe's forms of analysis. Thus they tend to neglect that discourses and orders of discourse impose limits on people's talk in social interaction.

References

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