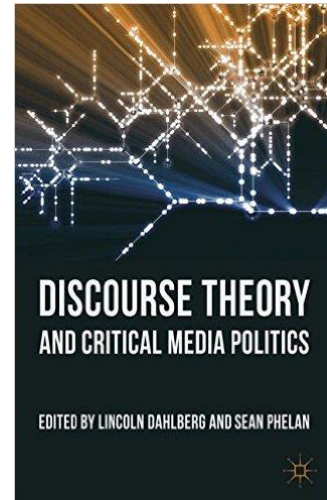


Lincoln Dahlberg and Sean Phelan (Eds.), **Discourse Theory and Critical Media Politics**, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 257 pp., \$105.00 (hardcover), \$31.00 (paperback).

Book Review by
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Discourse Theory and Critical Media Politics is an interesting and relevant contribution to media and communications scholarship, with the twofold aspiration to address “the relative lack of attention given to media by discourse theorists” (p. 6) and “the corresponding dearth of engagement with post-Marxist discourse theory in critical media politics research” (p. 6). Post-Marxist discourse theory refers to the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. With contributions from various scholars, this edited collection seeks to “explore the ‘contestability’ of discourse theory, as a critical theory, in relation to media politics—to examine the extent of its applicability, its limits, and various possibilities of fruitful articulation with other theoretical approaches” (p. 60).



The structure of the book unfolds as follows: Sean Phelan and Lincoln Dahlberg expertly introduce the reasons for publishing this book by tracing preexistent points of contact between discourse theory and media and communication studies to briefly and coherently introduce post-Marxist discourse theory. Dahlberg extends this general introduction by raising five questions that can make discourse theory “an approach to doing critical media politics” (p. 41) in accordance with editorial aspirations. These five interrelated questions investigate the existent and transforming relations of post-Marxist discourse theory (1) with critical theory, (2) with a radical public sphere as the space of critique in media politics, (3) with materiality, (4) with a radical political economy, and (5) with hegemony as a form of politics.

The first two chapters function as an introduction to post-Marxist discourse theory. They primarily target critical media politics scholars who would like to engage with post-Marxist discourse theory for the first time or who have some prior knowledge and want a deeper understanding. The subsequent six chapters provide a better grasp of “politics, the political and, above all, the possibility of radical social transformation” (p. 2) by offering unique theoretical explorations of post-Marxist discourse theory in relation to critical media politics, often in dialogue with other theoretical traditions. In response to the agenda set by the editors, the task was to use “*a specific theoretical focus that systematically explores [emphasis added] . . . the underdeveloped relationship between post-Marxist discourse theory and . . . critical media politics*” (p. 1).

It soon becomes clear that the contributions are diverse and that the authors include discourse theory allies and supporters as well as skeptics and critics. Because the focus is on theoretical underpinnings, prospective readers must have a clear idea of why they are reading the book and what sort of inspiration they are seeking. Jeremy Gilbert, for example, attempts to theoretically combine Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of signs and assemblages with Laclau and Mouffe’s understanding of

discourse while focusing empirically on the "X Factor," which might be interesting to someone who identifies as a Deleuzian. Wei-yuan Chang and Jason Glynos provide an empirical exploration of ideology and politics in the popular press with a psychoanalytical focus (helpful for those interested in an example of how post-Marxist discourse theory could be applied). It is very hard to think of a reader who would be interested in every contribution in this collection, both in terms of theory and practice. Consequently, it is also very hard to critically review every contribution in the collection. The dual focus of this book review is on contributions (1) that, to some extent, address the value of Laclau and Mouffe's work for researching social transformation within the context of digitized and mediatised communication in capitalist societies and (2) that expand the reader's understanding of their work in terms of its potential contribution to the wider field of media and communication.

Social Transformation, Mediated Communication, and Political Subjectivity in Capitalist Societies

The contribution of Oliver Marchart, who discusses the materiality of mediality, is perhaps one of the most incisive in the collection, constructively providing a theoretical update of our understanding of the media and mediated communication. His argument is based on the distinction of politics and the political (Mouffe, 2005) as derived from the differentiation between the ontic and the ontological planes. Marchart explains that "politics (conflict) has to be located on the ontic plane of the social while the political (antagonism) refers to the ontological dimension of society" (p. 77). Through his analysis of Laclau and Mouffe's works, Marchart argues for a focus on mediality as "the specific perspective under which the political can be integrated into media theory and theories of communication" (p. 78), bringing to the fore "a notion of the political, as antagonism, on an ontological level" (p. 78). Furthermore, he is able to theorize an understanding of the public sphere as an open yet contingent space of antagonisms expressed as mediality. His exploration reveals "the rhetorical foundation of society" (see also Laclau, 2014; thus, per Marchart, "the ultimate absence of any foundation of the social," p. 79) and asserts that media scholars can be aided by post-Marxist discourse theory in recognizing *social indeterminacy* and understanding what it means for media and communication research.

Jack Zeljko Bratich discusses autonomist Marxism mainly through Hardt and Negri in conjunction with post-Marxist discourse theory and makes a relevant criticism. He notes that "discourse had an easy entry but a difficult stay in Marxism" (p. 154) and further explains that the problem in Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) theory of hegemony was that it required another particular (i.e., the left) to become universal (i.e., to achieve hegemony)—a project carried on by Laclau (1990, 2005) within his work on left populism. The criticism initially focuses on the work's historicity within capitalism and extends to the authors' failure to grasp how power is really constituted, imagining revolutionary potential beyond traditional politics of state power. As Bratich argues, Hardt and Negri's split into *constituent* and *constituted* power is more explanatory because it allows the conceptualization of the *multitude* as a revolutionary agent.

Bratich's epistemology does not address the radical conceptualization of democracy—a project still carried on by Mouffe (2005, 2013)—which is addressed by Natalie Fenton in this collection:

Radical democracy of the sort proposed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) seeks to persistently contest the dominion of the majority that is the logical conclusion for liberal deliberative democrats, through the constant struggle to maximize multiplicity/difference of identity and struggles. (p. 184)

Equality and justice are preconditions for the radical and plural democracy that Laclau and Mouffe (1985) envisioned. Mouffe (2005, 2013) pragmatically seeks to extend this focus by arguing the importance of political agonism. For her, the strategy is radical politics through engagement with institutions, and the ultimate goal is to reclaim "the public": to hegemonize equality and justice. She argues that autonomism, in the sense that Bratich discusses, has a different strategy: radical politics through focus on self-organization of the multitude, with the ultimate goal being autonomy. The two strategies are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but she expresses great concern about the anti-institutional, essentialist character of current social movements, as she does not expect the eventual freefall or collapse of any hegemony; therefore, she chooses to focus on the transformation of all sorts of institutions toward democratic politics, that is, to become structurally equal and just. This insight is important for autonomism. Hence, Fenton's contribution (see also Fenton, 2016) considers the constant mediation of the politics of new social movements and what it might mean for their multiplicity and autonomy. She opens the discussion of how to contextualize new social movements, hegemony, and discourse within digital networks when, for instance, "the wider social contexts in which networks are formed and exist have a political architecture that predates the Internet" (p. 197).

These three contributions give a clearer idea of the quite demanding contemporary context in which the work of Laclau and Mouffe needs to be set to contribute to the field of media and communication. Their most discussed joint work, however, was written in 1985 in a rather different context that also needs to be brought into perspective in relation to the field.

Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: In Between Political Economy and Cultural Studies

Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics was written with the premise that "Left-wing thought today stands at a crossroads" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 1). In the first chapter, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) restated the evolution of Marxist tradition (beyond Marx) as an attempt to deal with what they recognized as a crisis of concept and practice:

The rise of new feminism, the protest movements of ethnic, national and sexual minorities, the anti-institutional ecology struggles waged by marginalised layers of the population, the anti-nuclear movement, the atypical forms of social struggle in countries on the capitalist periphery—all these imply an extension of conflictuality to a wide range of areas, which creates the potential, but no more than the potential, for an advance towards more free, democratic and egalitarian societies. (1985, p. 1)

To some extent, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) argued that the Marxist tradition seemed incapable of dealing with "intersectionality" (Crenshaw, 1989). Consequently, they tried in their joint work to raise awareness

of this issue to strategically theorize it: How could different subject positions be understood and approached within a less rational and objective political framework? Through their discourse analysis, they wanted to signify that the Marxist tradition—the tradition of materialism—had not been able to explain the emergence of new social movements or to implement its own strategy despite efforts to evolve from Marxist orthodoxy to revisionism and revolutionary syndicalism (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Their reading of Antonio Gramsci suggested that he was able to think beyond “a strict separation between hegemonic tasks and class identity” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 68), the main reason why Marxist thought was unable to sufficiently theorize hegemony, they argued. Nonetheless, Marxist thought and especially Gramsci, with his comparatively radical understanding of hegemony under the concept of historical blocs that imply the dialectical relationship between (structured) social practices and the creation and reproduction of the superstructure, provided Laclau and Mouffe with the necessary inspiration for their discourse. In their second chapter, they identified “economic determinism” and “class essentialism” as two substantial reasons why the Marxist tradition had failed to deal with this crisis. This was the point at which Laclau and Mouffe, representing the Essex school, clearly diverged from traditional Marxism and, in context, labeled themselves as post-Marxists. This raised fierce criticism from Marxists who accused them of having misunderstood Marx and Marxism (Geras, 1987); however, for Laclau and Mouffe, the two are not the same. They speak of “Marxist thought,” and thus they analyze and deconstruct Marxist discourses. This general period of unease with and within Marxist thought led, with time, to the debate of political economy versus cultural studies that is especially prevalent within the field of media and communication (Peck, 2006). Economic determinism started to alienate scholars from the Marxist tradition and provided strong arguments for further researching culture. In the context of fierce criticism by Marxists, Laclau and Mouffe can be seen as more akin to the considerably open and diverse cultural studies perspective (often represented by the Birmingham school). As noted by Marchart, cultural studies began

to view the process of hegemonic articulation—that is, of the political construction of meaning—as being located in all levels of social practice (which is a theoretical development that occurs simultaneously in “Essex and Birmingham” in the late 1970s and early 1980s—the difference being that in the Essex the focus was on politics and the state, while in Birmingham the focus was on culture and the media). (p. 72)

Nevertheless, “discourse theory provides a contribution to critical political economy, rather than being an *enemy* [emphasis in original] of such, as would be the case if it was positioned on the culture side of a political economy/culture divide” (Dahlberg, 2014, p. 56). In any case, it appears Laclau and Mouffe’s work can contribute to either side depending on the approach, but it might be in the best interest of the field to contribute to precisely debunking this conceptual division.

Laclau and Mouffe and the Field of Media and Communication

In their attempt to overcome such dualist thinking, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) strategically “construct the concept of hegemony” that “supposes a theoretical field dominated by the category of *articulation* [emphasis in original]” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 93). Taking into account the political construction (overdetermination) of the social through negotiated logics of equivalence and difference, the impossibility of closure of any subject’s position is recognized. Inherent antagonisms (as the limit of the

social) lead to articulatory practice with the ambition of discursive closure and the achievement of hegemony. The main aim for Laclau and Mouffe (1985) was to show that to move “towards a radical democratic politics,” one has to begin with acceptance of “the impossibility of the object ‘society’ as a rationally unified totality” (p. 99)—namely, their antiessentialism.

If hegemony is “understood as the general form of politics in modern capitalist societies” (Torfing, 1999, p. 110), it means that Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony and discourse must be understood and can work only within this context. The identified problem, to my understanding, is not how to use or operationalize post-Marxist discourse theory, which initially led the editors of this collection to focus on the theoretical contribution that discourse theory can make to critical media politics. The collection and the diversity of its contributions actually suggest that the “bringing theory into practice” framework (i.e., discourse theory into media studies; Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007) and mobilizing discourse theory for critical media politics (Dahlberg, 2014) might not be the best strategy. As Schou (2016) suggests, such effort to pin down a theory does not make much sense outside the strategy of a “normative-political” character of the sort that Laclau and Mouffe used to build their metatheory. A mere theoretical discussion of Laclau’s and Mouffe’s works does not suffice because their metatheoretical work is a political praxis in itself: a method of analysis and a method of articulation (see Howarth, 2005). Selective appropriation of aspects of their work or its perception as a macro theory diminishes such potential.

All in all, *Discourse Theory and Critical Media Politics* succeeds in providing a platform for a multiauthored discussion of post-Marxist discourse theory, but fails to address its own aim to *systematically* explore the discourse theory–media politics relationship, mainly because primacy is given to a highly disparate and unfocused theoretical engagement with Laclau and Mouffe. This creates a problem that is best highlighted through Peter Dahlgren’s wrap-up “from the perspective of an outsider” (2014, p. 223). He frames media researchers as “bricolage theorists” (p. 246) appropriating bits and pieces from theoretical traditions to explain what the collection seems to suggest: that it is unlikely that post-Marxist discourse theory will gain any momentum within the field. The best it can do is to provide ‘a useful toolkit’ for critical media politics scholars.

Such tools are already available for use empirically, analytically, and methodologically by media scholars, for example, as shown by Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) and by Torfing (1999). These tools can be applied in the field of media and communications, with an agenda to deconstruct the discursive systems of digitally mediated communication as well as politicize research and its scope, especially when combined with Mouffe’s agonistic approach. In conclusion, I suggest taking an antiessentialist material-discursive approach to digitally mediated communication in capitalist societies.

An Antiessentialist Material-Discursive Approach

The key characteristic that Laclau and, more so, Mouffe have been defending is antiessentialist theory. For Mouffe (2014), the aim is not that their theory of hegemony becomes hegemonic but rather that antiessentialist theories become hegemonic within the social sciences. In that sense, any work sharing this characteristic can work hand in hand with Laclau and Mouffe. With such a focused theoretical

perspective, this collection, for example, could have managed more systematic exploration of the identified conjunction. Feenberg's (2010) critical theory of technology can be quite helpful toward that end with his minimally theorized concept of "technological hegemony," which, combined with Laclau and Mouffe, can reveal the materialization of discourse in and through technology through what he calls "technological biases"—values inscribed materially into technologies through discourse. In addition, there have always been links through Mouffe to antiessentialist feminism. As Jørgensen (2016) recently suggested, the development of (feminist) new materialism challenges discourse theory with its more commonsense understanding of materiality and its incorporation of ethics and care. Although Barad's (2007) work, for instance, relies on discursive manifestations, it often lacks a political understanding of discourse that could be provided by Mouffe's work (2005). The suggested framework would comprehend discursive-material manifestations as being transformed from the "us-them" duality, constitutive of any identity (Mouffe, 2005), to the responsibility of the "we" (Jørgensen, 2016). How do we decide what is important to change, which "marks on bodies" (Barad, 2007) to prioritize on the path to social transformation?

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