Laclau and Mouffe and the ontology of radical negativity

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Laclau and Mouffe and the ontology of radical negativity

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In this article, I introduce and argue in favour of Laclau and Mouffe's ontological dimension in their post-structuralist discourse theory. Their ontological thinking is contrasted to Luhmann's claim of remaining within epistemology to show how the notion of radical negativity brings Laclau and Mouffe beyond an 'old European metaphysics of substance'. Ontological negativity is then contrasted to Foucault's 'modest positivism'. The problem with such a positivism is not that it overlooks 'deeper' layers, but rather the absence of the dimension of negativity is needed in order to grasp a discursive logic of articulation. Having established the necessity of including an ontological dimension of negativity, however, I question the claim that negativity equals antagonism and that the political may therefore be granted a primary ontological status. This claim is 'one step too far', and the theory must be rethought accordingly. I point out some of the theoretical implications of a 'de-ontologization' of antagonism and the political, and show that they can take place within the general framework of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory.

Keywords: Foucault; Laclau; Luhmann; Mouffe; negativity; ontology; the political

Introduction

The purpose of this article is threefold: first, it is an introduction to a central part of the theoretical background for Laclau and Mouffe's overall project, namely their ontological ambition. The second is to argue in favour of ontological reasoning as an essential part of the development of a social theoretical position, including a constructivist or post-structuralist one. The third is, however, to point out certain ontological claims in their discourse theory which I think cannot – despite their centrality – be maintained. I argue that the political cannot be granted a (primary) ontological status, but must be rethought as a specific 'ontic' articulation.

I contrast their ontological position to two other prominent writers who, from relatively similar points of departure, have reached quite different conclusions. Niklas Luhmann explicitly denied the need for ontology as 'old European' thinking inevitably caught in a 'metaphysics of substance'. Against Luhmann, I show that ontology is not made redundant by post-structuralism, but the content changes. Briefly stated, 'radical constructivism' cannot be limited to epistemology, but has ontological consequences, too.

Having established the legitimacy and fruitfulness of ontological reasoning, Laclau and Mouffe's ontology is briefly outlined and then contrasted to that of Michel Foucault. Despite the many similarities of their positions, in the interview in this issue Laclau

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(Hansen and Sonnichsen 2014a) distinguished them by pointing to Foucault's 'positivism', especially regarding their different concepts of 'discourse'. I therefore take a closer look at the way Foucault presents himself in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault 1974) as a 'positivist'. The problem with his positivism is not what is usually criticized by traditional critical theory, i.e. that 'remaining on the surface of things' functions as an ideological cover-up for the existing state of affairs. Rather, in the perspective of Laclau and Mouffe's ontology, the problem is that in order conceptually to grasp the set of central claims in Foucault's analysis – especially as it was developed in the genealogy – one has to move beyond a 'positive' description of events, discourses and regimes and take negativity into account.

Such an account is given in Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory through the affirmation of a radical, or ontological, negativity. Their ambition of thinking social ontology as marked by a constitutive or radical negativity is unobjectionable. However, I want to question the way negativity is equated with antagonism, and that the 'political', as opposed to the 'social', therefore can be granted an ontological primacy. This discussion starts by looking into Mouffe's critique of Rawls's 'political liberalism' in order to show what precisely is meant by the 'political'. I then take issue with the concept of antagonism as it has been presented and contrasted to the notions of dislocation and heterogeneity in Laclau's later writings. I argue that one cannot maintain the ontologically constitutive status of antagonism. Rather, antagonisms and, therefore, the political have to be thought as specific (ontic) articulations and cannot be granted an ontological primacy.

The article concludes by briefly outlining some of the consequences for the further development of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. It should be emphasized that this intervention is internal to Laclau and Mouffe's overall project. To the extent my criticisms prove valid, the following re-articulations will take place within their position and not moving it to a different theoretical terrain. My engagement with Luhmann and Foucault serves primarily to make Laclau and Mouffe's ontological position explicit by contrasting them with alternatives. Regarding ontological negativity, Laclau and Mouffe have a very strong point, but the criticisms of Luhmann and Foucault regard only that element.

Why ontology? From '*Substanzmetaphysik*' to ontological questioning

In light of systems theory, the engagement with ontological questions accompanying the post-structuralist turn carried in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 2001) seems odd. According to Luhmann, (radical) constructivism implies leaving 'old European' ontology behind for a purely epistemological stance (Luhmann 2013, 183 f.; cf. also Andersen 2003). Systems theory's anti-ontological stance is so strong that William Rasch even mentions it might seem 'perverted' to talk about 'Luhmann's Ontology' (Rasch 2013, 38).

In systems theory, cognition is conceptualized as observation, and all possible observations are based on distinctions, which cannot belong to the object under observation, but must necessarily belong to the observing system itself. '*There are no correlates in the environment of the system … for distinctions and designations (therefore for observations) … all distinctions and designations are purely internal recursive operations of a system*' (Luhmann 1990, 69). All achievements of knowledge 'are precisely internal achievements' (69), which is why Luhmann coined the label *radical constructivism* to describe systems theory's epistemology (Luhmann 1995, chapter 12). Any thought of a being of an object which would not be specific to a given system appears metaphysical (Luhmann 1995, 485) and has (or rather should have) been left behind in a 'radical de-

ontologizing of objects as such' (177) characterizing the modern world. To Luhmann, ontology is 'the result of a mode of observation that operates on the basis of a distinction between being and non-being and that subordinates all other distinctions to this one' (Luhmann 2013, 185), and in this sense 'guarantees the unity of the world as the unity of being' (186). It is this unity that has been left behind with the decline of stratified societies. It is 'old European', because it fits stratified differentiated societies' 'positions in the centre or at the apex from which the world and society can be observed without competition. The convincing concepts they offer are ontologically plausible concepts of being' (Luhmann 2013, 195). With the shift to functional differentiated (world) society, plural competing constructions of the world lead to epistemological thinking (Rasch 2013, 38).

More specifically, Luhmann launches two sets of interconnected criticisms against ontology. Firstly, ontology is metaphysical since it inevitably leads to claims of a non-system-specific substantial character, i.e. to '*Substanzmetaphysik*'. Secondly, ontology does not allow for complex or even paradoxical conceptual strategies. In ontology, the other side of the distinction between being and non-being can be discarded, leading necessarily to a monovalent logic (Luhmann 2013, 187).

It is my contention, though, that these criticisms are based on a concept of ontology which is too narrow. Even though classical ontology, as well as many present-day versions (e.g. Critical Realism (Sayer 1999) or Rational Choice (Mueller 1989)), do succumb to substance metaphysical claims (the social world consisting of 'real structures' in the first place, 'rational utility optimizers' in the second), such claims do not necessarily follow from questions of being *as such*. As Laclau and Mouffe put it, 'the strictly ontological question asks how entities have to be, so that the objectivity of a particular field is possible' (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, x). That is to say, we engage in ontological reasoning when we ask about the specific form of being which meets the conditions of possibilities of our theoretical propositions. Viewed in this light, there are actually many points in which Luhmann himself engages in questions that should be viewed as ontological, e.g. when he analyses the concept of 'world' in systems theory (cf. Rasch 2013, 39 f.).

Another case in point is when Luhmann suggests the 'reality of systems' (Luhmann 1995, 12). Many commentators have noted the realist ontological flavour this has. However, as Kneer and Nassehi have convincingly argued (1997, 112n39), Luhmann does not fall into the trap of traditional realism. 'The statement that there are systems is strictly speaking not a substance metaphysical statement about the being of systems, but a statement in an observing system, and, even more, a statement by which the theory of social systems "starts the game"' (Kneer and Nassehi 1997, 112n39, my translation). Any theory has to 'start the game', but by doing so, implicitly or explicitly, it opens the possibility of an ontological questioning of the condition of possibility of its basic claims. One could (and ought to) pose ontological questions to systems theory: what must the world look like if there can be systems; what are the preconditions of a (social) world which allows for divisions into sub-systems, if a plurality of observations are possible, etc.? In systems theory, the most general question is probably how objects have to be if they are structured according to the basic distinction of the system environment. First of all, they have to be primarily self-referential. They are necessarily contingent etc., but, of course, a whole set of other specifications follow. Likewise, a whole set is excluded, such as causal determinations, and for the social world methodological individualism, etc.

As I have already noted, the decisive step taken by Laclau and Mouffe in their ontology is the affirmation of a radical negativity (which they of course share with many other positions). The way Luhmann treats negativity in his definition of ontology is quite revealing. 'Ontology therefore guarantees the unity of the world as the unity of being. Only Nothing

[das Nichts] is excluded, but "nothing" is lost as a consequence. … The "non" [das Nicht] consumes itself, as it were. It can therefore be disregarded' (Luhmann 2013, 186–7). Seen from a perspective that tries to incorporate radical negativity, one cannot disregard the 'non', and even though '"nothing" is lost', this loss should be articulated in ways so as to produce effects on what is. Systems theory share the claim about contingency with discourse theory, and, as Laclau puts it, a contingent being is precisely one which did not *have to* be, i.e. can be radically annihilated (Laclau 1990). This possibility of not-being is not something that should be discarded (as classical ontology might well be criticized for doing). Quite the opposite, basic contingency, the basic possibility for not-being (i.e. negativity) marks all possible objects, leaves traces on them. Since it concerns *all* possible objects, a set of – strictly ontological – conclusions follow. One of these, also shared by systems and discourse theory, is that no object can 'be' (what it is) in and by itself, but is dependent on a 'processing system', or, as Laclau and Mouffe term it, a broader discursive articulation. As Laclau and Mouffe point out, an object that as one of its conditions of possibilities has the need of being articulated in broader discursive fields is an object which cannot acquire a final or full identity (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 111). Systems theory would presumably agree, but Laclau and Mouffe emphasize that the moment of negativity inherent in the distance to a full or final identity is an absolutely necessary feature of contingent objects and, therefore, of an ontological kind.

Laclau and Mouffe's ontology

Laclau and Mouffe's basic ontological question did not regard systems (in a systems-theoretical way) but *hegemony*: If something like hegemony – i.e. linking specific political demands to historically situated agents in contingent ways – is possible, what must social objects be like? The first part of the answer was in the negative vis-à-vis the Marxist tradition. Social actors cannot have an ultimate class core – they cannot have any core at all – and society cannot obey 'historical laws', i.e. be seen as passing through a set of predetermined historical stages on a way to an end-goal (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Social actors and society are truly open-ended. If something like hegemony is possible, we must assume the essential unfixity of the social. Or, as it was stated in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*: society does not exist! This does not mean, of course, that societies are dream-work nor that there are there only individuals (a thesis that presupposes as much fixity as does the base-superstructure model). It is a post-foundationalist critique of the idea of '"society" as a sutured and self-defined totality' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 111), i.e. a claim that society never manages to establish itself as a fixed ground for its partial processes.

Discourse theory has more concrete ontological claims, but a statement such as 'society does not exist' gives us the basic sense of an ontology of negativity in Laclau and Mouffe. Discourse theory's ontology consists in a set of limits and *im*possibilities, and its theorizing is based on these. It starts from the basic claim of the 'impossibility of society' and the essential unfixity of all possible social objects.[1] Such an essential unfixity requires an ontological dimension of negativity. Society is impossible because it is 'haunted' by an insurmountable negativity, a negativity which cannot be sublated (aufgehoben) in any dialectical movement, or made to disappear in the affirmation of it being simply the effect of a Kantian 'real opposition' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 122 f.; Laclau 2014b, 102 f.). *Radical* negativity means that it cannot be positivized by a deeper objectivity (e.g. the cunning of reason, society's movement of stages towards communism, etc.)

One of the ways radical negativity is articulated in discourse theory is through the Heideggerian distinction between the ontological and the ontic (Laclau 2004, 2014a; cf. also Marchart 2007). Affirming a radical or constitutive negativity breaks with the figure of an (ultimately) unified level of representation (Laclau 2014a, 122), contrary to dialectic negativity, which does not involve a real break in the space of representation, since it is an internal moment in an ultimately positive and unified process (Laclau 2004, 319; 2014a, 111). Translated into the distinction between the ontic and the ontological this means that the two cannot overlap; there is a certain unbridgeable distance between them. The ontological should not be thought of as the transcendental (in the traditional sense), i.e. as an abstraction of ever more universal features of the ontic beings (Laclau 2004, 288–9). In accordance with the later Heidegger, the ontological is viewed as an abyss (*Abgrund*), not the positive transcendental elements shared by all the ontic beings. The ontological is an abyss taking the classical place of the (positive) ground of the ontic beings. To affirm the ground has the character of an abyss does not mean simply that there is no ground for the ontic or that the ground is simply absent. There is always a need for grounding, for foundations, but this ontological need can only be satisfied by a specific ontic content which will never reach the level of the ontological. We will always be in an ongoing game of de/grounding (Laclau 2014a, 118–19). This ontological need of foundations, of grounding, must somehow be – partially and temporarily – overcome. It can, however, only be met by an ontic being, constitutively out of sync with the task: 'the ontic will never (completely) overlap with the ontological' (118–19).[2] Because of the impossibility of an overlapping with the ontological, all ontic being is 'contaminated' (Staten 1984) or 'haunted' (Derrida 1994) and without an 'ultimate fixation of meaning' (Laclau 2014a, 118). It is precisely this absence of ultimate fixations which cannot be accounted for in a purely 'positive' account. To substantiate this claim, I shall now take a closer look at Foucault's 'positivism'.

Beyond Foucault's 'positivism'

In the interview in the present issue, Laclau mentions that 'Foucault never had a conception of the ontic – ontological distinction. For him, all distinctions were ontic, and what he tried to do was to differentiate ever more areas of ontic differences' (Hansen and Sonnichsen 2014a). He also points to Foucault's 'positivism' as an element of the latter's thinking he does not share (Hansen and Sonnichsen 2014a). Contrasting the specific meaning of Foucault's positivism with Laclau and Mouffe's position is quite revealing in relation to an ontology of radical negativity. Contrary to Luhmann, it is not a question of Foucault rejecting the very relevance of ontology. Foucault famously named his own (genealogical) analytics a 'historical ontology of ourselves' (Foucault 1991, 45), and Oksala (2010) has convincingly argued that Foucault's analytics ought to be seen as ontological reasoning. The point is rather that Laclau and Mouffe's arguments for moving beyond his positivism (what Oksala calls his 'nominalism' (Oksala 2010, 449)) is quite strong.[3] I focus here on his early archaeological period, which is not to dismiss the changes taking place with the introduction of genealogy, most of which is very much in line with Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. Rather, it is because archaeology remained an integrated part of his overall analytics (Foucault 1991, 33), and it is in the *Archaeology* he states his positivism explicitly.

To view discourses as 'positivities' without deeper constituting layers was precisely one of the main points of Foucault's archaeology (Foucault 1974). Discourses should not be seen as the 'surface' revealing some deeper hidden unity, of whatever kind: neither a

common object of study, a common style or viewpoint, a constant set of operative concepts, nor a common theme (Foucault 1974). In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he explicitly stated (no doubt provocatively) that he was quite happy to be a positivist:

> If, by substituting the analysis of rarity for the search for totalities, the description of relations of exteriority for the theme of the transcendental foundation, the analysis of accumulations for the quest of the origin, one is a positivist, then I am quite happy to be one. (Foucault 1974, 125)

Foucault then states a set of distinctions to mark the way his 'positive' analysis is distinguished from a traditional one. He writes (and I italicize the positive (in both meanings) side of the distinctions):

> To describe a group of statements not as the closed, plethoric totality of a meaning, but as *an incomplete, fragmented figure*; to describe a group of statements not with reference to the interiority of an intention, a thought, or a subject, but *in accordance with the dispersion of an exteriority*; to describe a group of statements, in order to rediscover not the moment or the trace of their origin, but *the specific forms of an accumulation*, is certainly not to uncover an interpretation, to discover a foundation, or to free constituent acts; nor is it to decide on a rationality, or to embrace a teleology. *It is to establish what I am quite willing to call a positivity.* … [I]t is to define *the type of positivity of a discourse*. (Foucault 1974, 125)

So, when analysing a certain discourse, Foucault wants us to see that it is, first, not a closed totality given by a deeper meaning, as e.g. classic hermeneutics would have it, but rather incomplete and fragmented; a discursive formation is a 'distribution of gaps, voids, absences, limits, divisions', as he puts it (Foucault 1974, 119). Second, he underlines that statements should not be seen as meaningful sequences open for (hermeneutic) interpretations opening up towards an 'inner realm' of meaning. Statements maintain an 'element of exteriority', a thing-like, positive quality. Discourses should not be analysed as the result of wilful subject intentions, able to account for, internally, the specific organization of a set of statements in a discourse. Rather, the subjects are themselves positioned and distributed according to the same set of 'regularities' (Foucault 1974, chapter 2) which groups a set of statements as a discourse. Or, more precisely, as a discursive *formation* of dispersed elements, not a 'group' in the traditional sense of elements sharing a common inner feature. Third, Foucault wants to stress that the origin of a discursive formation cannot function as a teleological foundation, securing an evolution towards a predestined goal. Instead, the task is to account for the specific forms the development of the statements has taken, with an eye *both* to the rarity – i.e. not everything that is linguistically possible to say has actually been said – *and* to the specific forms of 'accumulations', by which Foucault points to the specific regularities involved in the actual development of statements, which differs from discourse to discourse.

To a certain extent Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory is in accordance with the positivism outlined by Foucault. The ontological dimension is precisely *not* a deep inner meaning, a foundation or an origin. If it were, we would effectively be back in Luhmann's '*Substanzmetaphysik*'. Following Laclau and Mouffe, the problem with Foucault's positivism is not to be identified with the traditional criticisms of positivism, i.e. its alleged inherent conservatism, due to its failure to see the real structures, intentions, meaning, etc., working behind the surface. As should be clear by now, the ontological dimension absent from Foucault's thinking that Laclau mentions is the moment of negativity, the contamination of the dispersed elements, which makes it impossible for them to acquire the status of 'positivities'. Laclau and Mouffe do not part company with Foucault in the claim that discourses are 'incomplete, fragmented figures' it is a quote, but it is a part from the last citation in the

former page. It that is too far back, and it should be referenced again, it is (Foucault 1974, 125). Instead, in order to be able to grasp incompleteness and fragmentation, and the possibility of different discourses articulating different statements in different ways, one has to move beyond the level of the positive, and 'show a sensitivity' for an ontological dimension of negativity. This ontological dimension, Heidegger's '*Abgrund*', is what Laclau and Mouffe wants us to include in our analytical strategies. To differentiate areas of ontic differences – positivities – should not summarily be rejected as 'futile positivism'. It is a huge step forward with respect to an essentialist searching for deeper layers. But it is only a first step, which must be accompanied with 'a sensitivity for the ontological dimension', as Laclau puts it (Hansen and Sonnichsen 2014a) in the precise meaning of a haunting or contamination of all ontic/positive elements by an irreducible negativity, an ontological '*Abgrund*'.

Negativity and antagonisms

We have now established the necessity of a dimension of ontological negativity. All social objects have, as part of their constitutive identity, not only the possibility but also the necessity of entering into contingent articulations. No being 'is' simply in and by itself. To acquire an identity, it must be linked to other objects, i.e. articulated. This linking, which does not follow from any ultimate necessity, is what is involved in Laclau and Mouffe's notion of discourse. However, within the theory, such linking is not only seen as discursive, but also as *political*, granting the political an ontological primacy (e.g. Laclau 1990, 33). In my view, it is precisely at this point the theory needs reconsideration: Granting antagonisms and the political an ontological privilege is going one step too far.

The step from the discursive to the political is by no means arbitrary. It is based on the insistence that linking of objects without a necessary relation to each other involves power and exclusions. Foucault would definitely agree, but it obviously defies the system's theoretical claim that power is 'the medium' for, and hence limited to one – the political – 'subsystem'. To Laclau and Mouffe the political *sub-system*, i.e. government, political parties, etc., should be seen as *politics*, and not as the political. Day-to-day politics functions according to a given set of rules, and when Laclau and Mouffe refer to *the political*, it is the point at (the struggle over) the very institutionalization of a given set of rules. The political cannot be limited to a specific region of society, but is present 'everywhere', when social rules are being questioned and institutionalized (Hansen and Sonnichsen 2014a; Mouffe 2000, 101; Marchart 2007).[4]

Elevating the political to a general ontological level takes its point of departure in Derrida's notion of undecidability. In discourse theory, undecidability functions as the ultimate condition of possibility for articulations (Laclau 1996). Articulation is contingent linking; otherwise we would have reproduction of deeper necessities. Contingency involves a real (not just superficial) possibility of alternative linkings, i.e. undecidability. Therefore, a decision must have been made which involves the exclusion of the possibilities which were ruled out, and the use of force or power: all social relations are contingent as well as *power* relations (Laclau 1990, 30–1).

We now see the intuition behind calling the ontological dimension of negativity 'the political'. What Laclau and Mouffe want to draw to our attention is that from contingency follow exclusions and power, which, in their approach, are precisely constitutive moments of the political.

The general argument is presented in a precise form in Mouffe's critique of the notion of 'reasonable pluralism' in Rawls's *Political Liberalism* (Rawls 1996). As Mouffe puts it:

> … the function of this distinction between 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable' is to draw a boundary between the doctrines that accept liberal principles and the ones who oppose them. It means that its function is a political one, since it aims at discriminating between a permissible pluralism of religious, moral, or philosophical conceptions (as long as those views can be relegated to the sphere of the private and satisfy liberal principles) and what would be an unacceptable pluralism because it would jeopardize the dominance of liberal principles in the public sphere. (Mouffe 2005, 223)

'Political liberalism' is blind to this moment of exclusion and power; even though it starts from the premise, acceptance of its basic values cannot be based on rationality:

> What political liberalism is at pains to eliminate is the element of 'undecidability' which is present in human relations. It offers us a picture of the well-ordered society as one from which – through rational agreement on justice – antagonism, violence, power and repression have disappeared. But it is only because they have been made invisible through a clever stratagem: the distinction between 'simple' and 'reasonable' pluralism. In that way, exclusions can be denied … (Mouffe 2000, 31)

What is presented as reasonable by Rawls 'as a moral exigency' is 'in fact a political decision' (Mouffe 2000, 31). Even though the set of acceptable positions to be delimited by a liberal democratic community appears as reasonable from within that community, it definitely does not when seen from those positions being excluded. From there, the lack of rationality behind the exclusion is what stands out. It is this neglect of acknowledgement of one's own, as well as any other possible order's, reliance upon exclusion and power that Mouffe criticizes in liberalism, even in its 'political', Rawlsian version. And it is precisely this element of pure decision, pure unfounded exclusion, which has an ontological quality, which shows us the effects of the '*Abgrund*' in Heidegger. (As Laclau has shown, even something as reasonable as an alcoholic seeking to repress the desire for alcohol involves force; from the point of view of the repressed desire, it is pure force (Laclau 1996, 112).)

Now, to underline the ontological quality of the absolutely unavoidable moment of power and (unfounded) exclusions following from undecidability, decisions and articulations are indeed well-founded. The question is, however, if power and exclusions in themselves qualify for naming a relation 'political'.[5] My contention is that something more is needed. In the theory, this something more is the presence of an antagonism. The decisive question is, therefore, whether antagonisms are constitutive, or, to put it slightly differently, whether exclusions necessarily lead to antagonistic relations and negativity.

The ontology of radical negativity: antagonisms or dislocation and social heterogeneity?

Granting antagonism a constitutive role stems from *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The theory's ontology has been developed since then, with the introduction of the notions of dislocation (Laclau 1990) and heterogeneity (Laclau 2005a; for an overview see Biglieri and Perelló 2012). These two notions are, in several places, explicitly presented as ontologically prior to antagonism (e.g. Laclau 2004, 318–19), but not unequivocally so. In the interview in the present issue, Laclau states that dislocation 'is just a deepening of the notion of antagonism as presented in the previous work'. I want to argue, first, that antagonism is not a deepening of dislocation, but a specific 'ontic' way of dealing with the experience of a prior negativity and, second, to point out that the consequence for the political is that its ontological primacy cannot be maintained.[6]

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, antagonisms were explicitly stated as the instance in which negativity as such could be shown, and were presented as the very limit of social objectivity (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 122). However, with the intervention of Slavoj Zizek (1990, 1989), the notion of antagonism was linked to that of the Lacanian Real and the Lacanian subject as the subject of lack. The main effect in discourse theory was that the (external) relations between two opposed identities in an antagonism – making it impossible for them to be what they are – was seen as less prior than the original (internal) lack at the 'bottom' of every identity, constituting subjectivity as such.[7]

With the introduction of the Lacanian notions of the Real and the lack, the ontology of discourse theory saw the introduction of the notion of dislocation as the basic conceptualization of negativity (Laclau 1990). Dislocation points to a constitutive crisis in representation: since no discursive space can achieve full closure all elements of that space are, to a greater or lesser extent, dislocated, that is to say more or less 'out of place'.[8] Laclau has more than once underlined that dislocation is a more fundamental form of negativity. In one place, he states 'antagonism is *already* a form of discursive inscription – i.e. of mastery – of something more primary' and 'not all dislocation needs to be constructed in an antagonistic way' (Laclau 2004, 319, italics in original). Obviously, this way of seeing the relation between dislocation and antagonism is the one I suggest be followed – with all its consequences.

With the publication of *On Populist Reason* (Laclau 2005a) in 2005, a third step was taken. Here, Laclau introduced the notion of social heterogeneity. Dislocation points to a certain crisis in a space of representation, which is there from the beginning, and not caused by an antagonistic enemy threatening the space. With heterogeneity Laclau went even further, pointing to elements radically excluded from a space of representation *as such* (Laclau 2005a, 140 f.). The important point is that this exclusion is not the same as the one found in antagonism, which Laclau even refers to as an 'inclusive exclusion' (Laclau 2004, 319). As he puts it, 'antagonism is not equivalent to radical exclusion. What it does is to dichotomize the social space, but *both* sides of the antagonistic relation are necessary in order to create a single space of representation' (319). In light of heterogeneity, the exclusion taking place in antagonism is *not* the place in which negativity as such is shown in the social space. Rather, we have to think of antagonism – despite the enmity, threat, and denial involved in it – as a discursive inscription, mastery even, of radical negativity. Just as was the case in dislocation, the conclusion is that antagonistic exclusion must be seen as a particular way of articulating a *prior* experience of the negative. In terms of the ontological difference, antagonism is an ontic content 'giving shape to' ontological negativity.

Stated in these terms, it seems difficult to maintain the claims that antagonism – and hence the political – can be viewed as ontologically primary. However, Laclau in many cases does so. In the interview in this issue, Laclau mentions that he has come to see that dislocation 'is just a deepening of the notion of antagonism as presented in the previous work' (Hansen and Sonnichsen 2014a). In a very recent article, he states that 'society does not succeed in constituting itself as an entirely objective order as a result of the presence, within itself, of antagonistic relations' (Laclau 2014a, 111). At the risk of over-interpreting, I find this quite a problematic statement. Following the later developments in the theory's ontology, the reason why society does not establish itself as an objective order is because of the presence of dislocations and heterogeneity. Antagonisms come in second, so to speak. Obviously, dislocation and heterogeneity often do lead to antagonistic relations. Very often, communities secure their internal coherence by pointing out an enemy as the source of their experienced dislocations (Laclau 2005a, 71). The problem in the quote is that antagonism is

given as the *reason* why society does not reach full objectivity. This grants antagonism precisely the ontologically constitutive role that dislocation and heterogeneity had denied it. Both might very well lead to emergence of antagonisms, indeed very often they do, but still it is not sufficient for claiming the ontological constitutive role of antagonisms.

Another way of raising the same issue is to ask whether exclusions (and therefore the use of power) *as such* involve antagonism. Indeed exclusions very often *do* lead to formation of antagonistic relationships, but, and this is my main point, they do not *need to*. For a relation to turn antagonistic, one of the poles must point out the other as an enemy, as the source of its predicament. The emergence of antagonistic relations is a very likely outcome in many cases, but since it is based upon a certain discursive inscription, it is only a likely and not a necessary result. Other inscriptions were also possible, and, because of that, antagonisms and the political cannot be granted an ontological primacy. My suggestion is that power and exclusions are re-articulated theoretically as ontological *conditions of possibilities* of politics and antagonism; any political process involves both, but the presence of power and exclusions is not sufficient for a relation to be political. Something more is needed, but the presence of this 'something more' is contingent, not something that can be – ontologically – taken for granted. If this is so, the political cannot be granted an ontological status. I cannot follow Laclau when he says that 'the field of a political ontology would also be the field of a general ontology' (Laclau 2014a, 123). The field of a general (social) ontology must be prior to the political.

To end this discussion I will point out some of the consequences for Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory following from 'de-ontologizing' antagonism; negativity must be seen as beyond and prior to its eventual political, antagonistic articulation. Before briefly sketching some of the consequences, I want to make clear that I do not see this obviously significant theoretical move as one of leaving Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical position. It is a matter of re-articulating it within its basic parameters. Their theorization of antagonistic relations is for the most part unobjectionable. What I am questioning is just the ontological status it can be granted. The general social ontology – of contingency, historicity, power, and not least the subject – can, and should, be maintained.

However, there are places where theoretical re-articulations are needed. One of the main distinctions guiding the theory has been the one between the 'social' (including politics) and the 'political'. It has been seen as coterminous with the one between sedimentation and reactivation (in the discourse-theoretical not the Husserlian sense (Laclau 1990, 2014a; Hansen and Sonnichsen 2014a)), which, however, cannot be maintained, at least not as a first or basic distinction. To the extent antagonism involves a 'certain mastery', ontologically speaking there is nothing separating a political articulation from all other possible discursive inscriptions. The theory must come to terms with the fact that economic, artistic, bureaucratic, or whatever articulations are at the same ontic level as political articulations. There is no doubt that antagonisms and, more generally, the formation of political demands, have a revelatory function (in showing the ultimate contingency of social relations (Laclau 2014a, 122)), in a way that e.g. bureaucratic decision-making has not. But it might well be considered if not e.g. art could be seen to have many of the same revelatory potentialities. In this sense, one of the first consequences is a broadening of the social fields the theory can and should be used to analyse. This idea is closely related to the development of the notion of social logics as one of the central categories of discourse theory (Glynos and Howarth 2007) with the qualification that there cannot be a basic distinction between 'social' and 'political' logics.

Political articulations, i.e. politicizations of social relations, of course, remain the central focus of the theory. After a 'de-ontologization' of the political, the prime task is to specify

the kind of logics which make a certain articulation political. Antagonistic relations (just as agonistic ones (Hansen and Sonnichsen 2014b)) are a case in point, but there is more to the specificity of political logics. Laclau has introduced the notion of 'social demands' as the 'minimal unit' for studying political processes (Laclau 2005a, 2005b). The notion of social demands is a very promising starting-point for reflections on the specificity of political articulations. In this sense, the political would be seen as a specific way of discursively mastering a more fundamental negativity – dislocations and heterogeneity – through the articulation of 'social demands' (which may or may not involve antagonistic relations). These 'deeper layers' of negativity make politics and the political possible, indeed very common and widespread, but are not coterminous with it. For a relation to be political, it must be articulated in the form of a demand. In this precise meaning, it makes good sense to maintain the notion of the political (as distinct from day-to-day politics), but it cannot claim to 'occupy the field of a general ontology'.

Conclusion: ontological negativity and discourse theory

With *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe made the path-breaking achievement of 'founding' social theorizing on an ever present radical negativity. Against a system's theoretical insistence on epistemology, I have shown that radical negativity holds an *ontological* quality, and one of the dimensions of theoretical reasoning should be of an ontological kind, as practised by Laclau and Mouffe. This is indeed what is missing in Foucault, and therefore it is necessary to move beyond his 'modest positivism'. To be able conceptually to grasp the possibility of different articulations of the elements, we have to move beyond such a positivism and conceive them as contaminated by negativity and unable to achieve full identities. As such, they are not only able to, but in need of being linked to other elements to be articulated. As Laclau and Mouffe have shown, and with which Foucault no doubt would be in complete agreement, such articulations are never 'neutral'; they always involve an element of power and exclusions.

At this point, however, I believe Laclau and Mouffe have moved one step too far, and we need to rethink the theory. My claim is that what follows from constitutive negativity, from the '*Abgrund*', are decisions, power, and exclusions. However, power and exclusions are not in themselves sufficient for a relation to be political. It takes something more, a specific articulation forming the relationship as a political one. Even an antagonistic relation is a specific articulation, where one of the poles points out the other as an enemy. The emergence of antagonisms is a very present possibility but, as I have shown, only a possibility, not a necessity. The political is a privileged epistemological site for showing effects of radical negativity, but it cannot be granted a general ontological status. My critique has significant consequences for the theory, but none that cannot be articulated within the general framework that Laclau and Mouffe have established. Even without the ontological primacy of antagonisms and the political, it remains one of the most challenging social theories available today.

Notes

1. One should notice the difference to systems theory which claims that society is improbable, not that it is impossible.
2. This impossibility of overlapping of the ontic and the ontological is what Heidegger referred to as the very 'ontological difference' (Laclau 2004, 288–9)
3. Regarding Oksala's analysis, she is correct when she argues, first, that Foucault indeed held ontological positions, and that his position did change, or was developed by the move from

archaeology to genealogy, from 'radical nominalism' to an (historical) 'ontology of the present'. However, she does not really seem to pose the strict ontological question of how reality must be if our theoretical claims are to be possible. As she underestimates the extent to which Foucault was serious about his positivism (which she dismisses as irony (Oksala 2010, 455)), she does not pose the question of the positivity of the elements which enters into Foucault's genealogical analytics. What is added in his genealogical analytics is the idea that the discursive rules are not in themselves sufficient to carry out the articulatory task of linking a set of elements (which in the genealogy consists not only of statements, but more generally of practices) which do not have any deeper necessary connection to each other. For this power is needed, and Foucault's genealogical studies direct our attention to the fact that a moment of power is involved in a contingent linking (cf. also Laclau 1993). The crucial question that needs to be asked is if it is possible for 'positive' statements (or 'events') to be linked in historical, specific constellations.

4. I return briefly to the way the notion of the political can be maintained without elevating it to a general ontological level.
5. In *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (Laclau 1990, 33 f.) Laclau summarizes the theory's social ontology in four points. All social objects are contingent, historical, the result of power relations, and, lastly, political. It is only the last point I want to question.
6. Obviously, I am not the first to point out that dislocation and heterogeneity should be viewed as ontologically prior to antagonism. Apart from several places in Laclau's own writings, e.g. Stavrakakis (1998, 184), Norval (2000, 223), Stäheli (2004, 234 f.), Dyrberg (2004, 247), and Biglieri and Perelló (2012) have all made this point. What I want to add is the consequence for ontological status granted the political.
7. I am not going further into the integration of Lacanian psychoanalysis in the otherwise post-structuralist or deconstructive discourse theory. It should be noted, though, that the theory of the subject (beyond subject positions) as 'the distance between the decision and the undecidable structure' (Laclau 1990, 41–5; 1996, 54 f.) is a very impressive achievement solving a set of theoretical problems one inevitably faces when remaining at the level of (positive) subject *positions*.
8. Dislocation is often used in two different ways in discourse theory. On the one hand, it designates a sense of (organic) crisis, an experience of the impossibility of going on in a given situation. On the other, there is the more general meaning, which is how I am using it: due to the impossibility of final closure of discourses, every identity, all elements of a given discourse, are constitutively dislocated, unable to achieve a final location in a structural arrangement.

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