

What does it mean to say that a hegemonic project is neo-liberal?

Some questions based on experiences from Denmark

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What does it mean to say that a hegemonic project is neo-liberal?

Some questions based on experiences from Denmark

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Panel:

The Logics of Hegemonic projects: neo-liberalism and more

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Abstract: In this paper I take my point of departure in the Government-coalitions led by Anders Fogh Rasmussen's liberal Party in the zero's in Denmark, in order to ask what theoretical resources the theory of hegemony as developed by Laclau and Mouffe has to offer, and where further developments and new theoretical articulations are needed. The paper does not offer a thorough analysis of the governments, but rather an historically informed discussion of the strength but also of the weaknesses of the theory at the present state. Especially I draw on the notions of nodal points and articulations and logics. I argue that certain parts of a Foucaultian analysis of liberal governmentality need to be articulated with the analytical frame-work.

Key words: Laclau, Mouffe, hegemony, unity of hegemonic projects, neo-liberalism, articulation, logics.

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Introduction

From 2001 until April 2009 the bourgeois Danish Governments in the zeros were led by Anders Fogh Rasmussen (present General Secretary of NATO), head of the Danish Liberal Party (Venstre). He successfully ran 3 campaigns, after having taken over as party chairman shortly after Venstre's (unexpected and close) defeat to the Social Democrats in 1998. Before taking over as head of the party Fogh Rasmussen was a highly ideological figure, among other thing author of the book *From Social State to Minimal State* (Rasmussen, 1993) in which he argued that the broad popular support for the welfare state was caused by the development of a 'slave mind', making most Danes sacrificing their natural liberties for social benefits.

That all changed when he was appointed head of the party. Much to the disliking of the more ideological inclined liberals in Denmark, his successful campaign was firmly based on the recognition of the legitimacy of the demand for 'safety' for everybody. Introducing 'contract politics' in Denmark, under the slogan 'Time for a change' and based on 5 easily communicated promises¹, he won the 2001 election to form a government with the Conservative Party (CP) and with the parliamentary support of right wing populist Danish Peoples Party (DPP). Even though electoral support has declined, the same coalition still holds power²

Governments of Anders Fogh Rasmussen

- AFR: *From social to minimal state*
- 2001: the liberals gained power in a coalition with Conservative party, supported by right-wing populist party
- Five points for the election campaign: "Time for a Change!"
- Introduced "safety" as a legitimate demand



1 The five policies were: Policies for the elderly, Law and order, 'Solid and fair' immigration policy, Policies on health especially 'Free choice on hospitals' – private as well as public, and no tax increase.

2 One of the things the centre left opposition is fighting the government on, is the 'Early retirements' through which people can redraw from the labour market before the official pensioning age of 65. When Anders Fogh Rasmussen gained power he promised not to abandon Early Retirement, as did his successor, Lars Løkke Rasmussen. However, in his 'New year's address to the nation, 2011' Lars Løkke Rasmussen stated that due to the financial crisis Denmark could no longer afford the After wage.

The manifest abandoning of the strongly liberalist content of his former position, opens up for interesting questions, which has also been debated in Denmark. Did Fogh Rasmussen make a complete 'sell-out' to gain power at the price of effectively doing Social Democratic politics (perhaps minus 10%) or was his 'move towards the middle' only a sham to cover up the harsh neo-liberal policies to be smuggled in thorough the back-door?

I won't present any final conclusions in this presentation, but rather present some considerations of why this question is indeed relevant for a Post-Marxists analysis of hegemony (E. Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; E. Laclau, 1990; E. Laclau, 1996a; E. Laclau, 2000b), and to point out some conceptual problems which have to be solved in order for us to be able to engage seriously in answering it.

What is it to do discourse/ hegemony analysis?

Let me start by pointing out one of the reasons why I find the notion of neo-liberal hegemony so intriguing in Post-Marxist hegemony-analysis. The reason is no-one call themselves neo-liberalists. Claiming a certain hegemony to be neo-liberal, seems to imply an evaluation of the content of the policies being carried out – despite of, or at least in equal weight with the 'representative signifier', providing the unity of the discourse. Now, this may seem to be a fairly obvious point, but it is a point which necessitates to take into account a hole set of features discourse theory often seem to neglect. Normally the focus in Laclauian discourse-theoretic hegemony analysis lies on what can be called the construction of the national-popular identity, i.e. gaining the public support (Howarth, Norval, & Stavrakakis, 2000)– and it is shown how the construction of such identities is based on the necessity of 'emptying' of the signifier, carrying out the unifying function of the (chain of equivalence of the) hegemonic projects. (E. Laclau, 1996c; E. Laclau, 2005)

In contrast to this figure, when Laclau and Mouffe refer to neo-liberalism, they appear to do so relating to its specific content. Mouffe e.g. writes:

‘Thatcher had been able to undermine the social democratic goals of 'equality of opportunity' and install a new hegemony around neo-liberal values. This hegemony has not been questioned by New Labour; its politics is informed by the basic ideological parameters of Thatcherism. To be sure it is a 'Thatcherism with a human face' ... But Labour, too, believes there is no alternative to the dominant neo-liberal frame-work.’ (Mouffe, 1998)11).

Not questioning the content of the statement, what I want to pose as a question is, what is this something *neo-liberalism* here? Is it an object? A (set of) logic/s? And what exactly does it mean to say that New Labour’s ‘politics *is informed by* the basic ideological parameters of Thatcherism’?

Let us go back to the original Gramscian concept of hegemony. To Gramsci, any possible lasting hegemonic project would have to be established around a class core: only the fundamental classes

could be able to carry out a hegemonic task (all other attempts were 'arbitrary and willed') (Gramsci, 1971). This basic distinction made it possible not only to distinguish between progressive and regressive hegemonies (cooptive/ transformative vs. expansive) (Mouffe, 1979), but also provide us with the ultimate unity of the hegemonic projects. To Gramsci politics was definitely a question of articulating ideological elements without necessary class-belonging, but the class core, in advance secured their identity and unity.³

In contrast to a Marxist/ Gramscian concept of hegemony, with post-structuralism, even a unity only secured by the articulatory logic cannot be upheld, if this logic is given in advance – i.e. is constituted at another, primary ontological level. So what then?

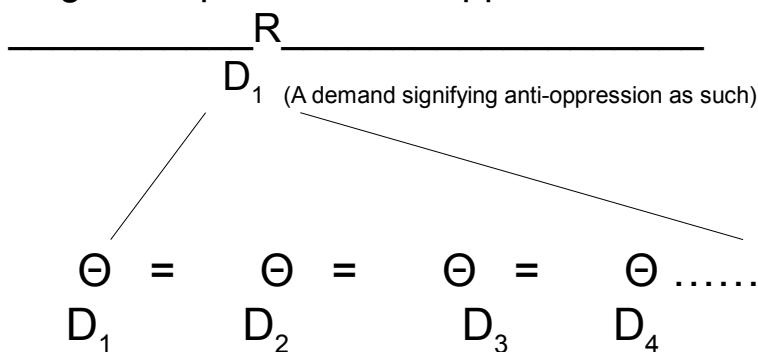
Articulation and logics

I think discourse theory gives two different answers to the question, which might be seen through the differences in the meaning (or perhaps just connotations of) the two concepts for centre, or the unifying function in the theory, namely nodal points and empty signifiers. As is probably well known, nodal points 'came first' in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (Laclau And Mouffe, 1985), whereas the notion of empty signifiers was developed along with Laclau's unfolding of the consequences of hegemony for the idea of universality. (E. Laclau, 1996b; E. Laclau, 2000a; E. Laclau, 2000b)

Let me summarise the argument. Since universality by definition cannot have a particular presence, some particularity must take on the task of representing something that is essential unachievable, essentially beyond. The only way a given particularity can perform that task is by increasingly emptying itself of attachment to any concrete/ particular content (or signified). One moment has to – simultaneously – to be a part of the equivalential chain *and* to stand out and represent the chain in its totality. Since anti-essentialism prohibits any notion of pre-given identity between the moments in the chain this emptying is based on the exclusion of the 'constitutive outside' of that which is not only different from, but a (radical) threat to the discourse in question. Laclau has presented the idea in the figure below: (Laclau, 2005: 130)

³ As well as giving an answer to the perhaps tricky question of whom or what the hegemonic *subject* is: to Gramsci it was still classes – even if in a highly mediated and representational form.

Regime experienced as oppressive



(Series of different demands constituting a anti-regime chain of equivalence)

Laclau's own examples of such empty signifiers are 'justice' and 'order', 'the return of Peron' but one might also think of the colour 'orange' in the Orange Revolution in Ukraine: 'Orange' signifies nothing, apart from a radical anti-previous-order position.

These examples work well when we are dealing with situations of strong dislocations and the splitting of the political space in two, and when the focus is on the construction / mobilisation of a national popular identity. They work far less well when we consider hegemonic projects such as Thatcherism or the government coalitions led by Anders Fogh Rasmussen in Denmark in the zero's. The reason is that politics does not only consist in the creation of a collective will, but also in carrying out politics, which are much less 'public' much less directly involved in creating a political identity/ gaining support.⁴ There are also a lot of things going on 'behind the scene' or at least far less public. It must be such concrete policies Laclau and Mouffe refer to when talking about 'politics informed by' e.g. Thatcherism. An obvious example from the AFK-governments was the administrative reform of local political organisations (reducing the old Counties to Regions without the possibility of taxation and with basically only the hospitals left as their discretion). But also the attempts at reforming management and form of (self)ownership in higher education could be interesting cases.

⁴ This is not to imply that gaining popular support is unimportant, or had been absent from Anders Fogh Rasmussens project. Quite the opposite, as he explicitly stated in an interview in Weekend Avisen, January 2003: 'Political struggle today is something quite different from the last century. Bills and reforms are secondary, old fashioned, actually a bit distracting; basic is the struggle of attitudes, of values. When you've won the struggle of attitudes, then you can come with your bills etc. ... If you want to more basically to turn a society in another direction, it is the debate on values one should start with ... we can in good order make these changes incrementally by setting up a new agenda...' (Mortensen, 2008): 196-7

This (not very surprising) claim of politics taking place also beyond the creation of popular identities/ support is what lies behind much of the so-called post-hegemony critique (Beasley-Murray, 2003; Beasley-Murray, 2009; Lash, 2007). However, I generally find it theoretically quite weak, with a much too simple historical stage model (we used to be in the age of hegemony, now we're in the age of post-hegemony, before: the people; now the 'multitude', or whatever.)

Instead an articulation with certain aspects of Foucault's analysis of liberal and neo-liberal governmentality might well prove to be a highly productive theoretical articulation in thinking about what neo-liberalism is, and what it means to talk about neo-liberal hegemony.

Neo-liberalism as a logic

Not-so-public policies, as well as their eventual unity in a hegemonic project, appear much more intuitively approachable in terms of nodal points, understood as a specific *logic of articulation*. (Glynos & Howarth, 2007; E. Laclau & Mouffe, 1985)

This means that to claim that a specific political or hegemonic project is neo-liberal - that its 'politics is informed by basic ideological parameters of neo-liberalism' – consists in claiming, not that its unity is provided by 'neo-liberalism' as an empty signifier, but that one or more neo-liberal logic/s are primary, in the sense that the other moments of the hegemonic project are articulated around it. Articulation is perhaps the most central concept in discourse theory, pointing out that all meaning is depending upon a specific articulation within a given discourse, which modifies the identity of the articulated moment, as a result of that articulation. (E. Laclau & Mouffe, 1985): 115)

In terms of neo-liberal hegemonies it means that the other elements in the particular project gain their specific meaning from being articulated in a neo-liberal way. This means that simply to talk about 'neo-liberal hegemony' is far from being sufficiently precise, since the term could cover a whole range of probably quite different hegemonic projects.

It is of course also possible that a specific government simply do not acquire the kind of unity we easily assume when talking about a hegemonic project. It is probably quite easily conceivable that there is no common articulatory logic informing all policies carried out by a particular government. This could well be the case in Denmark where minority governments are the norm. However, in the case of VK (O), even though formally it was a minority government, the coalition with the Danish People's Party was strong enough for us to consider it a majority coalition. Regarding neo-liberalism one might well consider whether the government's nationalism, and the quite explicit anti-im-

migration policies where an integrated part of the over-all project, or rather a quite pragmatic – if very central – way of gaining power.

Now, having established that neo-liberalism should be seen as an articulatory logic a set of questions arises. I will end my presentation by briefly summing them up. The first is to specify what a logic/s of neo-liberalism actually consists of. One central part of this issue, regards the possibility of exactly distinguishing *neo-liberalism*/ *neo-liberal* logics from liberalism or liberal logics. As has been pointed out by Foucault and his followers, in contrast to classic liberalism, neo-liberalism does not necessarily entail rolling back the state, but rather the re-organisation of the state in accordance with market-like arrangements. (Burchell, Gordon, Miller, & Foucault, 1991; Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1991) Obviously, in terms of logics, such market-like arrangements need not involve neither privatisation nor even the actual use of money in a ‘seller – buyer’ set up. Marketisation may take many forms and (probably) cover a whole set of logics, which hasn’t yet been specified conclusively.

This leads to another question. Marketisation undoubtedly holds a central place in neo-liberalism. Could we then assume that any presence of (the use of) logics of the market would qualify for a neo-liberal hegemonic project? One could – perhaps? - imagine it as a moment in a social democratic discourse/ hegemonic project, centred around another nodal point, such as the struggle for equality and redistribution, as suggested by Mouffe (Mouffe, 1998) (p.13) ⁵

5 At least for political reasons, one might hope that this could be the case, that there can be alternatives to neo-liberalism. Of course, it would not be without its own complications: could the use of privatisation and marketisation be supportive for equality? An interesting case to look into would be the Danish experiences with private hospital

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