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# Hegemony and Meaning

In the previous chapter I showed that the Connellian framework relies upon the concept of hegemony to explain the durable nature of men's domination of women, and to structure the hierarchy in relations among men. I gave a brief background to the concept, showing that its main conceptual impact is to bring 'cultural' aspects of social life into the explanatory core of social theory alongside material or 'structural' aspects. However I concluded that the Connellian framework is unable to lead progressive change among men at a collective level because Connell's account of hegemony reduces the cultural aspects of social process down to a secondary force less powerful than material aspects.

Despite this criticism, I believe that 'hegemony,' as a description of the relationship between men and social predominance, to be a useful insight into social process if it is more fully developed. This chapter expands upon the concept of hegemony using Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) picture of hegemony as the characteristic process of democratic politics. Briefly, the thesis of Laclau and Mouffe is that of all the developments in Marxism since the work of Marx himself, only Gramsci's idea of hegemony offers anything substantially new. Through an intricate and closely argued

case, Laclau and Mouffe conclude that hegemony is in fact the most accurate description of the process of politics in modern societies. Far from being a sophisticated version of simple domination, they argue that hegemony is actually a crucial condition for democracy because of one of hegemony's standing requirements: the process of contestation of meaning. Meaning can always be contested because meaning is arrived at through the existence of difference, and of course the exact nature of each specific difference is seen differently from each different perspective in the terrain of difference.

Laclau and Mouffe argue that hegemony is the momentary achievement of closure of meaning, i.e. a successful claim that a specified difference exists and that this specified difference means only one thing. Such closure is only ever temporary or contingent – it can never be finally and permanently achieved. However closure of meaning in particular social fields has historically occurred over long periods of time – centuries in some cases – giving rise to beliefs that such meanings are unassailable. Laclau and Mouffe argue, however, that this unassailable quality is in fact a discursive effect which must constantly be reproduced in the face of other possibilities, no matter the extent to which its unicity of meaning has become sedimented into structured social arrangements or codified into laws.

A major criticism of Laclau and Mouffe's work is that it does not conceptualise the linkage between the open terrain of meaning and the material exigencies of practical life. I agree with this criticism, and in the following chapter I address this criticism by offering several accounts which together sketch the missing conceptual linkage. However in this chapter I limit discussion to a summary of Laclau and Mouffe's account of hegemony, and how I apply their formulation to the Connellian framework.

### ***Laclau and Mouffe's terrain of politics***

Laclau and Mouffe situate their argument within the problematic of left wing politics in the twentieth century, specifically the Marxist idea of 'class' and the role this idea has played in socialist analysis. For nineteenth century and early twentieth century Marxists, class operated as an ontological category, that is, as an unavoidable and irreducible social reality. The recognisable and familiar forms of social life were theorised as emerging from conflict between classes. But class has not proved to be the major organising category in society, nor has class conflict prevailed as the major driver of social change. Laclau and Mouffe show that the Marxist category of class, far from being something simply 'found' upon observation, has been socially constructed in a process of

assigning specific meanings to people who are all seen to have certain characteristics in common.

Laclau and Mouffe point out that establishing this notion of class and assigning the membership of the various classes involves a temporary closure of the possibilities of how people might be described. For example, a person can be described in multiple ways – as parent, worker, inhabitant of such-and-such a place, kin to these people, as ill or healthy, old, young, and so on – the possibilities are endless. The process of creating, defining and populating a ‘class’ involves picking out just one descriptor, or a delimited set of descriptors, from this infinite list, and proceeding as though the selected criteria are meaningful while all the other possibilities are, for the moment, not relevant or are not meaningful. In other words, the application of ‘class’ to a person involves a momentary closure of meaning: this person *is* working/ruling class. All such persons belong to a class, and this class has a necessary relation with other classes which determines its future.

Laclau and Mouffe (1985:85) emphasise that

...the socialist determination of the working class does not arise spontaneously but depends upon the political mediation of intellectuals.

Despite the efforts of Marxist intellectuals to cohere this class formation via their mediation efforts, the intellectuals claimed that they were simply observing an already-existing phenomenon:

Such mediation ... was not conceived as *articulation* – that is to say, as a *political construction* from dissimilar elements. It had an epistemological basis: socialist intellectuals *read* in the working class its objective destiny. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:85)

This “read[ing] in the working class its objective destiny” is a socio-political operation, carried out in order to constellate a specific set of social objects, relations and identities. And the aim of constellating this particular set of social relations is in order to lead society in a specific direction, that is, towards a socialist society. But

...there is no logical and necessary relation between socialist objectives and the positions of social agents in the relations of production; and ... the articulation between them is external and does not proceed from any *natural* movement of each to unite with the other. In other words, their articulation must be regarded as a hegemonic relation. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:86).

That is, the articulation between socialist objectives and the working class is a piece of concrete social action intended to lead to a specific outcome. The notion of class

gives voice to socialist objectives in the actions which cohere a collection of people into a class.

It is the thinking of Gramsci that first alerts Marxists to the constructed nature of class, yet even Gramsci does not fully unfold all the ramifications of his view.

In Gramsci politics is finally conceived as articulation [rather than a battle between entities fixed *a priori*], and through his concept of historical bloc a profound and radical complexity is introduced into the theorisation of the social. Yet even for Gramsci, the ultimate core of the hegemonic subject's identity is constituted at a point external to the space it articulates: the logic of hegemony does not unfold all of its constitutive effects on the theoretical terrain of classical Marxism. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:85)

In other words Gramsci still assumes a structuralist source of identity outside of political contestation.

Using Gramsci's view as a starting point and identifying the limits of Gramsci's application of his own idea, Laclau and Mouffe now extend Gramsci's view to its logical limits. They argue that in fact *all* social formations or socially identifiable positions, identities, or collectivities rely upon a closure of meaning via a specific pattern of meaning-linkages to other subject positions and collectivities.

The political meaning of a ... [social protest] movement is not given from the beginning: it crucially depends upon its *hegemonic articulation* with other struggles and demands. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:87, emphasis added)

### Difference, equivalence and hegemony

It will have become clear by now that Laclau and Mouffe use the concept of 'hegemony' in a rather different way both to Gramsci and to Connell. As I showed in the previous chapter, Gramsci by and large accepts that leadership of social process by a small group is both inevitable and desirable. For him the key issue is not the existence of a leading group *per se* but, rather, the relation in which that group stands to the majority of society. Gramsci points out that totalitarians, such as the fascists, refuse all efforts towards interchangeability between the membership of the leading group and the majority, and that this results in a dysfunctional and destructive disconnection of the leading group from the rest of society – in effect the leading group ceases to lead and instead merely commands. For Gramsci the leading group can only effectively lead when they experience a passionate feeling-connection with the populus. Gramsci wished to see a constant flow of membership between the leading group and the majority, in order to keep this passionate connection alive and to prevent the sedimenting of a relation of domination (Howson 2005: 31-32).

I also argued in the previous chapter that, in contrast, Connell's formulation of hegemony prioritises domination. For him the function of leadership is irrelevant: men's relationships with others contains no aspect of legitimate or beneficial leadership. The best that men can do is collaborate with other social groups whose claims towards social change have what Connell considers to be a legitimate basis.

Laclau and Mouffe, however, move beyond both these formulations, and do so by grounding their view in a post-structuralist examination of the creation of meaning via the tension between equivalence and difference. The famous linguist Ferdinand de Saussure argued for the distinction between signifier and signified: an object does not have any specific meaning in itself. Instead, an object (in Saussure's terminology, a sign) can have an infinite number of meanings applied to it – that is, a sign can signify any meaning. There is thus an open-ended slippage between signs and what they can signify. Despite this, certain objects do come to mean specific things, but this is merely “conventional” in the sense that it has become widely agreed. It is this wide agreement about a very large number of conventional meanings which enables language to act as a vector of communication via its capacity to ‘carry’ meaning between speakers (Sanders 2004).

The open-endedness of meaning remains, however, as a highly significant factor in social life. It is because the creation of meaning is infinite that the use of language can be expanded and developed to describe and communicate more and more phenomena. This open-ended creation of meaning in turn enables us to think new things and arrive at new meanings. Meaning is created by delineating difference: a simple and practical example is that we may be looking at three tables, but you tell me that one is a bench, another is a desk, while the third is a dining table. All three obviously match the criteria of ‘table’, having a flat surface raised off the ground by legs, but various other different and specific characteristics enable their differential labelling into three different sorts of table. In principle this differentiation or the identifying of difference is infinite: we can go on indefinitely identifying and labelling the differences between the various tables, and develop complex lexicons of difference, enabling us to communicate about the objects in new and complex ways. That is, difference is open-ended, and this gives rise to the infiniteness or open-endedness of meaning, and thus to language.

Laclau and Mouffe apply this view to the realm of politics and to the conceptualisation of social life. Hunter (1987) claims that they do not argue for their

application here – they simply go ahead and assert it and, in consequence, their analysis relies upon the reader accepting their assertion. I argue, however, that they are justified in this application on epistemological grounds, and do not simply rely upon belief: all conceptualisations of any sort are “situated” (Haraway 1991) in the sense that every conceptualisation is developed by a person in some pre-existing social and cultural context. Every social and cultural context, and every act in every context, entails a politics of some sort, acknowledged or not, so that all conceptualisations are, at one level, political. This aspect of social reality is reflected in Saussure’s view: any linguistic formulation is the presentation of a specific and defined set of differences rather than the presentation of positive definite facts.

Despite this entirely open-ended terrain of meaning, certain specific meanings are in fact enduring and circulate widely, enabling the illusion of stability and permanence attaching to significant social formations. One such formation is ‘the subject’, the ‘agent’ or the ‘individual’. Another significant formation is ‘society’ itself (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:95). Obviously at a practical level we can look around us and see other people, and we live our lives within the structuring parameters of social systems in a taken-for-granted manner. However whether one is defined as a ‘person’, a ‘subject’, a ‘citizen’, an ‘individual’ and so on, entails a different worldview with different political results. Likewise with ‘society’: do we mean ‘nation’ (which sometimes also means ‘territory’ – but not always), or ‘Western society’, or a defined jurisdiction, or ‘the community’? In other words the sort of talk we promulgate about taken-for-granted aspects of life, the words we use to describe it, carry certain meanings which are created via the highlighting of specific differences and ignoring other differences. In turn, the linguistic activity of describing social life in effect evokes certain aspects of social life while negating or skipping over other aspects. Hence the application of the linguistic process of meaning-creation to politics and to understanding political contestation is entirely appropriate.

Laclau and Mouffe argue that any definition is in effect a “closure” or “unicity” of meaning (1985:15). For them, any defined position, whether it be a political position, a personal identity, a group, an ‘interest’, or a definition of ‘society’ – is generated by picking out one meaning and applying this meaning in order to create a “subject position” (1985:121-122). Thus in their account a political ‘subject’ can be a single person or a collective of any size. The act of ‘closure’ of meaning involves ‘refusing’ other meanings – that is. squeezing them out or pushing them away, and thus bringing into

sharp relief, or crystallising, just one meaning. Obviously such a move is always contingent: the closure of meaning takes constant effort and is never fully achieved since other 'refused' meanings hover in the wings, so to speak.

A very significant aspect with respect to difference is that in order for difference to be identified there must be some relation between the two terms of the difference. The identification and naming of difference thus is in effect the defining of a relation. In order for there to be a relation between the terms of the difference there must be some connection – that is, there must be what Laclau and Mouffe call some 'equivalence': each term of the difference must recognise itself as different to the other term but part of *the same difference* (1985:127-9). This identifying of equivalence is the operation that occurs to form a group of people into a 'class': people who are in employment are equivalent to the extent that they have that characteristic in common, and so on this basis the label 'working class' can be applied to them all. At the same time the whole point of delineating a class at all is in order to set it apart from or different to another class.

Thus equivalence and difference interact constantly in tension with one another. Equivalence is never fully achieved – i.e. the elements making up a subject position never entirely dissolve into each other. Nor is difference either fully achieved, since difference can only be identified through the relation of equivalence between the poles of the difference, so that difference relies on the existence of an 'other'. This dynamic tension, a relation they label 'antagonism,' is the relationship amongst subject positions within a democracy,.

### Antagonism and articulation

In Laclau and Mouffe's view the emergence of antagonism is only possible because the open-ended nature of discourse always prevents full and permanent closure of any one position or moment within it. They contrast this arrangement to earlier historical situations in which the differing segments of a population within a given territory had what they call a 'relation of exteriority'. They use the examples of 'popular' social movements, common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, and 'democratic' social movements such as the multiple movements since WWII. In the first, "A maximum of separation has been reached: no element of the system of equivalences enters into relations other than those of opposition to the elements of the other system. There are not one but two societies" (1985:129-30). Or in other words, the "*popular subject position* ... is constituted on the basis of dividing the political space into two

antagonistic camps” (1985:131). The “*democratic subject position*”, on the other hand, involves “a clearly delimited antagonism which does not divide society in that way.” (1985:131) This specifically democratic arrangement enables antagonisms to proceed as a normal aspect of social life without at the same time destroying social cohesion.

On this account, politics as Laclau and Mouffe conceive it entails a relation of *articulation* between subject positions – that is, the creation of each subject position as an identifiable position is made possible only through its relation to other subject positions. There are two common meanings of ‘articulation’; one meaning has to do with speaking clearly or giving a distinct and precise description. The other common meaning is to do with movement which is restricted in defined ways: the Latin root is “*artus*”, meaning joint or connecting part. In this sense ‘articulation’ is the free but confined movements of two limbs around a joint such as an ankle, elbow or wrist. The metaphor of movement of limbs may clarify Laclau and Mouffe’s use of the term ‘articulate’: the elbow joint, for example, brings the upper arm and the lower arm into a relation with each other, allowing each to move freely with respect to the other. This ‘free’ movement is free in the sense that, although certain movements are prevented by the morphology of the joint, there is a very wide range of movements which are possible, and the specific sequences and combinations of movement within the possible range are not pre-determined. At the same time the elbow keeps the two segments of the arm tied together. Were the elbow joint to be pulled apart (or ‘disarticulated’ to use the medical term), then meaningful movement of the two segments of arm in relation to each other ceases to be possible. The two segments of arm would then be ‘floating’ in relation to each other, rather than articulating with each other or, in Laclau and Mouffe’s terms, the two segments would then be said to be in a ‘relation of exteriority’ to each other.

This concrete metaphor referring to physical objects illustrates the special way in which Laclau and Mouffe use the term ‘articulate’. However the metaphor can be seriously misleading when taken too far. As discussed above, the objects forming the social terrain are, as Laclau and Mouffe point out, neither physical objects or simple logico-conceptual creations (1985:122). The social terrain is one of discursively<sup>1</sup> created

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<sup>1</sup> I use ‘discursive’ when discussing aspects of my formulation of discourse, rather than the term ‘discursive’ which can mean simply discussion or consciously reflective talk, as when Connell and Messerschmidt (2005:842) point out that “Recognising the nondiscursive and unreflective dimensions of gender gives us some sense of the limits to discursive flexibility.” My usage stresses the links between meaning, politics and practical action, so that almost all actions which occur in social settings are ‘discursive’ in that they are meaningful, although not necessarily ‘discursive’.

subject positions, which coalesce only to the extent that the infinitely open-ended nature of meaning can be momentarily closed around a specified difference.

Equivalences among or across elements can be identified almost endlessly, so that, unlike the morphological limits in the limb/joint, if a desired movement is not possible within the current discursive formation, then another discourse can be created in which the desired movement becomes possible. An example of this operation is the emergence of the feminist argument, put forward by Mary Wollstonecraft (1792/1975:285-6) that women are 'irrational' because of limited access to education rather than because they are women and therefore 'naturally' irrational. The older, sexist, story prevented women making a rational argument about their uneducated status by dismissing such an argument as not rational, that is, it moved beyond the limits of the older discourse. A new discourse had to be formed which enabled this new feminist articulation, with the older discourse then forming a subject position in the new discourse. In this example, the new discourse is using a large number of the same terms as the older discourse – men, women, rationality, education. At the same time, the new discourse enables the delineation of new differences and hence new meanings. Thus the new discourse enables new articulations not possible within the older discourse.

Possibly the most significant aspect of Laclau and Mouffe's view of articulation is that the parties to the articulation, that is, 'subject positions', come into being via the articulating movement with each other. In other words, the delineation of difference within an equivalence is a movement of articulation and at the same time is an operation that defines (at least) two subject positions. This means that a subject position does not exist independently of its discursive setting, and in fact every subject position only comes into existence with (at least) another discursively linked subject position as part of its horizon of possibility. This logical fact is specified by the linguistic requirement of the existence of an 'other' in order to crystallise a meaning, but it is worth explicating in relation to subject positions, since it is through the notion of subject positions that Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical development can come to have practical application.

To apply this to the example above of the emergence of the feminist claim for women's education, the older sexist discourse had two subject positions, 'men' and 'women', where 'men' are naturally rational and 'women' are naturally irrational. The new feminist discourse also had two subject positions, 'men' and 'women', but these terms now specified each along an axis of 'education': men are educated and women are

(unfairly) uneducated. At the same time the new discourse shifted the relation between gender and 'rational' away from a discourse of naturalism and instead linked 'rational' to 'educated'. Thus we have the same *words* used for the subject positions in two quite different discourses. This can lead to predictable cross-purposes in common social communication: in a social setting 'women' can be taken to mean 'naturally irrational' and 'unfairly disadvantaged', depending on which discourse is foremost at any moment. Indeed, a great deal of common social contestation is a contest for which discourse will prevail at any moment (a "frame dispute" – see Chapter 5 Section I).

The important thing here which takes Laclau and Mouffe's analysis beyond discussion of mere semantics is its grounding in the notion of discourses – that is, discourses suggest specific courses of action in social interactions. In one discourse the observation that women are irrational is taken as an affirmation of the natural order, and leads to a course of action on that basis. In the other discourse, observation of the same phenomenon leads to a quite different course of action, that is, calls for women's access to education. Thus when applied in a conceptual terrain of multiple discourses the issue of meaning directly relates to politics and to the formation of social life. And in this example it can be seen that the subject positions in either discourse always have a specific relation with each other internal to that discourse, to the extent that 'men' in one discourse means something quite different to 'men' in the other discourse. Finally, each meaning of the term 'men' arises in a specific discourse in relation to the other subject position of that same discourse – and it is this crucial formative relation to its other subject position which most strongly gives the sense of Laclau and Mouffe's notion of 'articulation'. The formation of the new feminist discourse enables 'women' to articulate with 'men' in a new way not possible in the older discourse.

I will now come back to Laclau and Mouffe's account of the notion of antagonism and tie it in to their account of hegemony. Subject positions are the momentary closure, via specific formulations of the difference-equivalence tension, of the open-endedness of meaning. In their example of the Marxist formation of the working class, hegemony is the drawing together of a collectivity of entities by altering the difference-equivalence tension between the entities in order to highlight the equivalences among them and to displace the 'difference' pole onto other subject positions outside of the collectivity (though in the same discourse). Through this operation all the elements in the newly hegemonised subject position appear to share an important similarity, and this similarity

marks them off from others outside of the collectivity – who now appear to be ‘different’ to ‘us’. A “frontier” (1985:12) emerges between ‘us’ as the newly hegemonised group and ‘them’, and the political relation across this frontier is what Laclau and Mouffe call an “antagonism” (1985:136).

Thus, the two conditions of a hegemonic articulation are the presence of antagonistic forces and the instability of the frontiers which separate them. Only the presence of a vast area of floating elements and the possibility of their articulation to opposite camps – which implies a constant redefinition of the latter – is what constitutes the terrain permitting us to define a practice as hegemonic. Without equivalence and without frontiers, it is impossible to speak strictly of hegemony. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:136)

In this view, hegemony arises only in situations where the definition of one subject position can be changed by another – that is, in conditions of “the instability of the frontiers which separate them” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 136). If this is not so then the relation is more usefully characterised as command or rule, that is, a situation in which at least one party is not changed by the relation. Antagonism may certainly be present, but if one party is able to successfully resist instability at the frontier between it and the other party then hegemony is not present.

On this account, hegemony is a kind of ‘drawing together/holding together’ which operates by altering the existing closures in the terrain of meaning in order to lead or push social process in a specific direction or to create a specific social form. Laclau and Mouffe re-formulate Gramsci here to say that hegemony operates to create an ‘historical bloc’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 136). Hegemony operates on subject positions - themselves momentary closures of meaning – by shifting their patterns of openness and closure so as to render incoherent some articulations and at the same time to open up newly coherent articulations. Laclau and Mouffe argue that this operation of hegemony *is the terrain of politics itself* in democratic societies (1985:193).

Thus hegemony is possible precisely because meaning is never finally and fully resolved or fixed, and in democracies this ontological characteristic of meaning has been hitched to legitimate political processes. Social arrangements (at least in democracies) can be portrayed in an infinite number of ways, and this aspect of social life is fundamental to processes of social change.

### ***The Logic of equivalence and the notion of ‘centre’***

One of Laclau and Mouffe’s principal points is to argue that a fundamental conceptual error of Marxist thinking, including that of Gramsci, is to imagine society as

defined by only one antagonism. They argue that in the modern era since the French Revolution, the terrain of politics is no longer confined to only one antagonism between two groups or subject positions. The Declaration of the Rights of Man during the French Revolution instituted a new discursive terrain which revolves around a nodal point of “the Rights of Man”; that is, a specific formulation of equality.

{T}he Declaration of the Rights of Man, would provide the discursive conditions which make it possible to propose the different forms of inequality as illegitimate and anti-natural, and thus make them equivalent as forms of oppression. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:155)

The ‘logic of equivalence’, then, has the remarkable property of being a logic unconnected with specific concrete social conditions and thus can be applied to any area of social life. But, most importantly, in democracies after the French Revolution this logic of equivalence was accepted as a legitimate argument in favour of social change. Of course repressive social forces still continued to operate, as they do today. But repression and social marginalisation could now be opposed by showing their equivalence to a rejection of democratic principles.

This decisive mutation in the political imaginary of Western societies took place two hundred years ago and can be defined in these terms: the logic of equivalence was transformed into the fundamental instrument of production of the social. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:155)

In other words the logic of equivalence enables the incorporation of more and more groups into a newly produced ‘society’. The operation of this logic has enabled the twentieth century’s multiplication of claims to equality by a variety of protest movements – a possibility unimaginable in classical Marxism (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:151).

One of the most significant aspects of instituting the democratic discursive terrain from the late eighteenth century is that this does not require there to be any single social agent or social group which is a source of power or legitimacy. Indeed there is no longer any single terrain of political contestation.

Hegemony is, quite simply, a political *type of relation, a form*, if one so wishes, of politics; but not a determinable location within a topography of the social. In a given social formation, there can be a variety of hegemonic nodal points. Evidently some of them may be highly overdetermined [i.e. appear structurally fixed]: they may constitute points of condensation of a number of social relations and thus, become the focal point of a multiplicity of totalizing effects. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:139)

But even though a “multiplicity of totalising effects” may exist, this does not constitute a ‘centre’; rather it describes the “irreducible plurality of the social” (Laclau

and Mouffe 1985:139). In other words, hegemony in modern societies does not require a centre, or a single social hierarchy with a top and a bottom. The core of their argument about the relation of hegemony and democracy is that instituting the logic of equivalence as the “instrument of production of the social” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:155) means that henceforth the coherence of the social revolves around a self-referential source of legitimacy: we cohere together as a recognisable social group because of the equivalences between us. That is, social cohesion arises in the extent that we are like each other or similar to each other, rather than in people’s relation to a fixed point in the social landscape. Historically this marks a massive shift away from sources of social legitimacy in God, the monarchy, the human place in a natural order, and other non-hegemonised anchors.

At the same time the existence of language and with it the possibility of our self-identity in recognisable groups, as an ‘us’, is possible only because of the logic of difference. Previous historical arrangements took difference to signify a social ‘order’ affixed to referents external to social process. The democratic social discourse, however, legitimates the process of difference being discovered and generated within social process itself. Equivalence is never finally achieved but neither is difference able to fully dismantle the equivalences leading to the formation of identities. The result is a characteristically democratic permanent instability or uncertainty, “when the reproduction of the different social areas takes place in permanently changing conditions which constantly require the construction of new systems of differences” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:138).

Laclau and Mouffe argue that this situation is identical with the full logical development of Gramsci’s idea of hegemony: If hegemonic leadership can be exercised in relation to ‘class’ and if ‘class’ is not a given social category but is a creation of the intellectuals, then this general leadership process can be applied to any point in social life. From here Laclau and Mouffe explicate the generality of this exercise of hegemony as a matter of deploying equivalence/difference tensions to create new meanings, new subject positions and new discourses.

{T}his leads to an inescapable conclusion: no hegemonic logic can account for the totality of the social and constitute its centre, for in that case a new suture [i.e. closure] would have been produced and the very concept of hegemony would have eliminated itself. The openness of the social is, thus, the precondition of every hegemonic practice. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:142)

This “openness of the social” – that is, the open-ended nature of democratic social process, is not, of course, fully open at every moment. As Laclau and Mouffe note, hegemonic articulations constantly and pervasively operate via closures of meaning, and “a multiplicity of totalising effects” operate at any one time so as to give the effect that entities such as ‘society’ or patriarchy or ‘the social order’ exist. One powerful analytic benefit of Laclau and Mouffe’s account, however, is in enabling a view of how these effects are brought about at the level of perception via specific manipulations of meaning. It is of course relatively straightforward to note the material and practical arrangements which support these totalising effects: relations between physical objects in space, physically codified laws, flows of measurable economic activity and so on. What is much harder to grasp is how these material and practical things come to have the *meanings* they have, and why and how it is that those meanings are stabilised. Laclau and Mouffe’s account of hegemony as leadership in the production of meaning enables us to conceptualize the role of meaning in creating totalising effects such as the idea of ‘society’.

A case in point is the notion of patriarchy, as used by Connell in his theoretical account of masculinity. Laclau and Mouffe’s view here enables a distinction to be drawn between ‘totalising *effects*’ and the permanence of actual material formations. A very important effect of social process is to render the current configurations of social life as ‘normal’. But Laclau and Mouffe’s argument highlights that this normalisation is an *effect* of social process. The normalising process can be extensive and “may constitute points of condensation of a number of social relations and thus, become the focal point of a multiplicity of totalizing effects” (1985:139). Such is the case, I argue, with the statistics and phenomena Connell cites as “Facts in the Case” (Connell 1987:Ch 1): he makes a case that patriarchy completely pervades the social space to the extent of the “global” domination of women by men, and this domination is permanently and necessarily defended through a set of practices he calls hegemonic masculinity.

Connell is observing not an achieved social totality but rather a converging set of totalising effects. Laclau and Mouffe’s account of the formation of subject positions via hegemonic articulations enables the view that these effects are achieved via multiple intersecting, overlapping and diverging discourses. In contrast to this view, Connell believes these multiple effects *produce* the terrain of gender relations: relations among men and between women and men always arise from the single relation of the global

domination of women by men, that is, patriarchy, and this is the single shaper of gender relations at the broad scale. In other words Connell is operating within the terrain that these totalising effects seek to create: the discourse effects which have historically authorised women's economic and political marginalisation achieve their traction in social life by conveying the impression that thus and only thus is social life coherent. Connell has failed to interrogate these totalising effects, and instead has taken up the view they offer that social order properly emanates from one centre or one relation.

This is not to deny the existence of the material formations Connell records. Likewise, the discourses seeking to normalise patriarchy also exist – and obviously such discourses and formations have existed since long before democratic social processes. Rather, the view enabled by Laclau and Mouffe's work enables a shift of the analytical standpoint beyond these formations and discourses so as to enable an understanding of how their totalising effects are produced.

### ***Discourses and nodal points***

On several occasions I have mentioned the concept of 'nodal points', most notably in the previous section when arguing that the logic of equivalence has become the nodal point of democratic social process. In this section I will further develop the definition of 'nodal points', especially in relation to the concept of 'discourse'.

As a first step, I will sharpen the definition of the concept of discourse. Laclau and Mouffe use Foucault's (1972:31-39) definition of discourse as "regularity in dispersion" of subject positions (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:105). "Dispersion" here implies some sort of recognisable pattern to a terrain of subject positions. Laclau and Mouffe contrast "dispersion" to "multiplicity", which is simply multiple subject positions that 'float' in relation to each other (1985:105). Hence dispersion is a pattern of relationships among subject positions which gives unity to a discourse. Significantly, dispersion as pattern-of-relationships is different to a 'structure' giving unity. In Laclau and Mouffe's formulation, the pattern of relationships emerges from the discursive flow and isn't separate from or prior to the flow.

What delineates a specific discourse, then, is the identification of a pattern among the subject positions such that all subject positions within the discourse are brought into meaningful relation to each other. This meaningful relation, being a pattern rather than a structure, is by definition extendable – that is, more or fewer subject positions can be contained in a discourse and the discourse continues to be recognisable as the same

discourse. Laclau and Mouffe posit that this extendability of the discourse's pattern is a key characteristic of hegemony, and this extendability is made possible via the logics of equivalence and difference inherent in the formation of subject positions: new equivalences can be identified, and new articulations among subject positions thereby become possible. A pertinent example here is the novel application of the idea of 'equality' by nineteenth century feminists, who argued that the situation of women is equivalent in important respects to the situation of slaves and of the working class.

This pattern of relationships which enables a discourse can be described as revolving around a nodal point. For Laclau and Mouffe the term nodal point originates in Lacan's notion of 'point de capiton':

Translated into English as 'quilting point' or 'anchoring point', this term refers literally to an upholstery button, a device which pins down the stuffing in upholstery work. Lacan (1977, p. 303) uses the term to discuss how particular signifiers retroactively stitch the subject into the signifying chain. (Atkinson 2004: 390)

Laclau and Mouffe construe Lacan's approach in a rather more structural way as a "master signifier" which

involves the notion of a particular element assuming a 'universal' structuring function within a certain discursive field – actually, whatever organisation that field has is only the result of that function – without the particularity of the element *per se* predetermining that function. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: xi)

In a similar structuring vein, Clegg uses Callon's (1986) description of a nodal point as "an obligatory passage point" or, in Clegg's own words, "the construction of a conduit through which traffic must necessarily pass" (Clegg 1989:204). Using Clegg's analogy, the nodal point does not determine the volume of traffic or the nature of the vehicles which pass through it – that is, a nodal point is not a structural determinant. Rather, the nodal point is a structural ingredient in that it forces a specific pattern on the flow of traffic: all traffic must pass through this point.

On this account, the pattern of relationships among the subject positions in a discourse all have some reference to the nodal point. A discourse is defined as the regularity of dispersion of subject positions, according to Foucault (1972). Laclau and Mouffe point out that hegemony-as-politics forms discourses by bringing about a hegemonic articulation which foregrounds the equivalences among certain entities, while displacing the differences among them to the margins of the discourse. Following these accounts, I argue that the nodal point provides the point around which the equivalences

among the subject positions come to be recognised as equivalences – in other words, the nodal point of a discourse *is* a nodal point because it enables a defined similarity among subject positions to appear meaningful as an equivalence.

The example Laclau and Mouffe use is the moment in 1789 when equality becomes instituted as a nodal point of democratic society via the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. They argue that the notion of equality then enables the many claims to inclusion, enfranchisement and so on in the subsequent two hundred years, and that this happens when the various claimant groups portray their specific “forms of inequality as illegitimate and anti-natural, and thus make them equivalent as forms of oppression” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:155). An early example of this was Wollstonecraft’s 1792 publication of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, following closely upon the French Revolution. For a group’s claim to make sense, or to be meaningful as a hegemonic articulation of democracy, it must in some way deal with equality. The very identity of the group, the bringing-into-being of a group as distinct from merely a collection of people, occurs through this nodal point of equality. The group’s identity revolves around the specific form of inequality under which they illegitimately suffer.

A nodal point thus constitutes a doorway or ‘obligatory passage point’ to the pattern observable in the regularised dispersion of subject positions in a discourse. The pattern can only be observed or make sense if one “passes through” that point. But of course ‘doorway’ and ‘passage point’ are metaphors: one does not ‘pass through’ anything physical. The ‘passing through’ occurs only at the level of meaning and symbol. That is, in order for a discourse to appear to the observer as a coherent field, the observer must accept the set of meanings condensing around the nodal point. Without this acceptance of meanings, the discourse is unobservable as a discourse – that is, no cohering patterns among the subject positions is identifiable. However, once the meanings in the nodal point are taken up and applied to the observed phenomena, the relationships among the subject positions emerge as ‘making sense’ – that is, the various subject positions in the discourse appear to have meaningful relationships to each other, and the observer can thus perceive (and thereby effectively participate in) the discourse.

Michel Callon, in his study of the fishermen and the scallops of St Brieuc bay (Callon 1986), gives a detailed account of the emergence of a new discourse via the creation of an “obligatory passage point” or nodal point. Following a trip to a scallop farm

in Japan, three pioneering researchers propose that St Brieuc's rapidly-disappearing scallops (a different species to that farmed in Japan) may also be 'farmed', thus ensuring the local fishermen's continued livelihoods. Callon weaves a gripping narrative in which all the parties – the three researchers, the fishermen, the scallops, and the marine science community – become subject positions in a discourse which revolves around the nodal point of the St Brieuc scallops' willingness to submit to domestication. Each subject position's relation to the others comes into being as each subject position engages with the nodal point: will the scallops submit?. Callon's study elucidates the practical difficulties faced by the pioneering researchers as they seek to create and stabilise the nodal point. A crucial operation here is "enrolling" the various subject positions by suggesting a set of actions or interests through which each subject position might engage with the nodal point.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately it is the scallops which reject the nodal point: they refuse the offer of domestication, and the whole project dissolves.

To further elucidate the concept of nodal point, I will examine the nodal points in the example I brought forward earlier of the issue of women's rationality/irrationality. My argument in this section is that a discourse revolves around a nodal point, and this nodal point is a point with which all subject positions in the discourse have a relation. That is, the nodal point is something which all the subject positions have in common. This commonality could exist as a statement which all subject positions agree is pertinent to the current moment. The patriarchal nodal point is something like 'men are naturally rational'. This proposition enables the specific subject positions in the discourse to diverge along their familiar lines: 'men' have rational characteristics while 'women' have irrational characteristics. Wollstonecraft, however, was able to argue that the patriarchal nodal point does not universally apply. She was able to do this by drawing together a disparate collection of observable practical phenomena such as some women's obvious rational capacities contrasted to some men's irrationality, and the lack of rationality amongst boys. Further thinking and analysis eventually resulted in the well-known view that rationality is learned through quite specific processes. Through a range of practical actions over many decades, feminists were able to stabilise this argument as the nodal point of a new discourse, which could be stated as 'gendered characteristics are learned'. From here feminists were able to also bring the democratic nodal point into relation with this 'learning' discourse to argue that women's exclusion from education is illegitimate, in

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 6 for an expanded account of Callon's description of the discourse-creation process.

effect creating a feminist discourse with a nodal point something like ‘women are unfairly excluded’.

As each nodal point is stabilised, at the same time there is articulation between the two subject positions ‘men’ and ‘women’. At each turn of the process, that is, as each nodal point and its discourse emerges, ‘men’ and ‘women’ come to mean slightly different things, and the relation between them also changes. At the analytic level of each discourse the subject positions are unique – that is, the ‘men’ of the patriarchal discourse shares only its label with the ‘men’ of the other discourses. The meaning of ‘men’ shifts from ‘authorised patriarchs’ to ‘educated in rationality’ to ‘illegitimate oppressors’. At the same time the fact that this *label is* shared is highly significant for practical life: actual male persons can easily associate with ‘men’ in each of the three discourses.

### ***The Connellian framework as a discourse***

In relation to the Connellian framework, in the previous section of this chapter I argue that the framework’s structural determinism occurs where Connell takes the phenomena he observes and theorises that they entirely exhaust the terrain of gender relations, with all other phenomena which do not fit his view regarded as local ‘reversals’ rather than constitutive elements in gender relations. The entry point into the terrain is “the general connection of authority with masculinity” (Connell 1987:78), which he describes as “the main axis of the power structure of gender” (1987: 109). From here he is able to elaborate his terrain of gender relations: “hierarchies of authority” within masculinity, “a core in the power structure of gender” (1987:109) and, most significantly of all, the crystallisation of ‘interests’ around the existence of the inequality arising ultimately from the general connection of authority with masculinity (1987: 137).

Stated in these terms the gender topography described in the Connellian framework fits the description of a discourse, whose nodal point is a statement along the lines of ‘social authority is associated with masculinity’. Connell’s ‘interests’ are identical with the various subject positions’ relations with the nodal point; that is, men generally as a broad group benefit from close alignment with the statement the nodal point purveys, while women generally are disadvantaged by it. Thus most men comply with the nodal point, and a rather smaller number of men actively seek to stabilise the nodal point, that is, a minority of men exercise the crucial hegemonising function. Some men contest their position within the discourse, others are subordinated within it, while other men are pushed out to its margins, that is, some men are marginalised. Many women comply

with the nodal point, for various reasons, and many women also directly contest the nodal point by taking it up as a subject position in feminist discourses.

Other discourses exist which do not operate via the nodal point of masculine authority, such as nineteenth century discourses creating women as authorised around issues of temperance and social hygiene, or twentieth century discourses authorising women in relation to childcare. Feminist discourses especially do not take up masculine authority as their nodal point, instead locating the association of masculinity and authority as a subject position which stands in relation to feminist nodal points arising in discourses of equality. None of these discourses are prior, and no one discourse cancels out the others. Rather, discourses co-exist in a complex web of interrelations in which they are able to contingently support and undermine each other.

Following Laclau and Mouffe's argument about the openness of the social, the terrain Connell helpfully describes can not exhaust the entire current terrain of gender, nor does it fully specify all possible formations in that terrain into the future. Rather, Connell describes the discourse in gender relations which posits itself to *be* gender relations, and deploys its nodal point to justify itself: social authority is fully commensurate with masculinity, and therefore all other discourses have less authority. Connell has identified the discourse of gender which claims universal application. But in democratic polities this can never be anything more than a claim, for two reasons: a) other discourses of gender operate alongside it which have their own irreducible and material effects, and, b) new discourses can be, and are, legitimately created.

It may be possible to show that the masculine authority discourse does have some characteristic which enables it to attain a specific sort of pre-eminence in gender relations, perhaps on account of its long history, or perhaps along lines that it may provide access to larger quanta of material resources than other discourses of gender. But such a historical or material case is not made in the Connellian framework. Connell simply asserts its priority, leading to an implicit universalising or determinist claim.

The 'depressing pall' Connell casts over the possibilities of progressive change among men results when he does not theoretically step beyond the dimensions of the single discourse of masculine authority. As with all discourses, the logic of this discourse is internally consistent: to step away from its (hegemonic/complicit) masculinity is to step away from social authority and thus to enter into social incoherence. But this association of masculinity and authority is not an *a priori* reality, so it does not have the universal

traction Connell attributes to it. Rather, it has itself emerged from cultural processes which use relations of hegemony to create and maintain symbolic associations, and has become the nodal point of a specific discourse among many other hegemonised symbolic associations and their discourses.

The multiple discourses approach offered here has many ramifications, perhaps the most significant of which is the possibility of observing and conceptualising male identity and masculinity in a multiplicity of privileging and oppressing discourses, none of which is prior or universalised. Academic scholarship is understandably wary about conceiving men as systematically oppressed or marginalised, but this wariness arises because of the universalising habit of thought which assumes a person or group cannot be both privileged and oppressed. The identification of subject positions which articulate specific discursive relations, however, enables this universalising habit of thought to be allocated its appropriate domain: a particular *subject position* cannot be both privileged and oppressed – but subject positions are not the same as people. The conceptual complexification of the lives of men, and indeed of gender relations, which this leads to opens new possibilities for conceptualising substantial and progressive change among men.

However, more immediately Laclau and Mouffe's work is recognised to be short on practical embedment, as I have already noted, and because of this in the following two chapters I will develop a number of Laclau and Mouffe's concepts in order to show how their conceptual edifice has connections with empirical referents. Chapter 5 examines two issues: how multiple discourses and their nodal points manifest side by side in actual social interaction; and the relationship between subject positions and the identities of actual persons. Chapter 6 then examines how nodal points are created in the first place and what is their relationship with social change; and how can interests and inequality be thought in relation to discourses. Chapter 6 concludes with a clarification of the concept of hegemony itself. With this theoretical development in place, Chapter 7 re-describes the Connellian framework more thoroughly as one discourse among many discourses of gender.