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The Force of Discourses

The creation of new discourses

As discussed in Chapter 1, the issue of change in relation to men is a core motivator in both the Connellian framework and this thesis. One of Connell's main points about change in gender relations is that tensions or internal conflicts – what he calls “crisis tendencies” – are to be expected in gender relations given the conflict between most men's interest in the gender status quo and most women's interest in rejecting it (1987:63, 158-163). Indeed, he views crisis tendencies as broadly productive of both the gender order and specific masculinities: the four masculinities described in Part II of *Masculinities* are identified as arising at particular intersections of conflicting social forces (1995:90). He argues that patriarchy is well-versed in responding to crisis tendencies and acting to incorporate their tensions into new orthodoxies, so that the tensions and conflicts generating a sense of crisis do not necessarily produce significant change.

Something similar is apparent in the closing comments in the previous chapter regarding the tensions in Max Mosley's life and the possibilities for change. Certainly change is occurring in Mosley's life, even if only because of the public announcement of his sexual tastes and the ensuing court case – but this is not necessarily ‘progressive’ change in the terms important to Connell and myself. Chapter 3 shows that Connell's

particular theorisation of the landscape of gender leads him to the conclusion that substantial and widespread progressive change is impossible for most men collectively as men. He nevertheless holds out some hope that change, albeit small-scale, may occur when individual men find personal motivations to make things better for the women in their lives or to address some of the costs of masculinity they experience as individual men.

In order to make a clearer distinction between change of any sort and the more substantial and especially progressive change which is the focus of this thesis, this first section of the current chapter will further develop the conceptual terrain of multiple discourses to offer a more detailed and practical discussion of the issue of change in general. The key move in this discussion is to distinguish between the creation of new subject positions within an existing discourse versus the creation of a whole new discourse. This entails a brief discussion of the emergence of new discourses in general.

The basic structure of a discourse, as presented in this thesis, is that a discourse always contains at least two subject positions which articulate around a nodal point. Chapter 4 applied this model to conclude that the Connellian framework can be usefully described as a discourse whose nodal point is a statement along the lines of 'social authority properly resides with men.' For this reason the Connellian framework was provisionally re-named as 'the discourse of masculine authority'. In principle this discourse can include an open-ended number of subject positions, and more or different subject positions will not alter its nodal point and thus will not substantially affect the discourse as a coherent entity. Thus, as Connell argues, the creation of the 'homosexual' in the nineteenth century and the emergence of the 'feminist' in the twentieth century have not fundamentally altered the structure of the masculine authority discourse in itself.

Note, however, that in his account Connell positions the protest femininities and thus the entire feminist effort as only another subject position in the discourse of masculine authority. Here the multi-discourses approach enables considerably enhanced theorisation. For example, nineteenth century critics of women's exclusion from public life (see Chapter 4) were able to eventually claim that women were irrational not by nature but because they were uneducated. More importantly these critics were able to position women's exclusion from education as illegitimate, and were able to do this by

showing an equivalence between women's situation and the broad acceptance of equality as a fundamental principle of social life.

These early feminists in effect stabilised a new nodal point by combining subject positions from several discourses which had up until then not been related: discourses holding the subject positions 'women', 'rationality' and 'equality'. Although the association of these *ideas* is relatively straightforward, and indeed had already been presaged in the writings of Wollstonecraft and others from the late eighteenth century onwards, what is politically and practically significant is that those early feminists were now able to stabilise these ideas as a nodal point of a new *discourse*. That is, they articulated these ideas into associations with material resources in the form of access to communication channels and political figures, organisations of women and their supporters, stories of personal identity and how individuals deal with change, and programs for concrete action at several scales of social life.

In addition, the creation of this new nodal point also entailed the creation of at least two subject positions and an antagonism between them. The minimal subject positions are suggested by the content of the nodal point, which is something like 'women are excluded from education'. Clearly the feminists took the position that this exclusion is unfair, while the opposing subject position is that it is legitimate. Of course, a great deal more than only two subject positions very quickly emerged.

However, what started out as a new subject position in an existing discourse ('women are uneducated rather than irrational') was transformed via deliberate and creative social action into the nodal point of an entirely new discourse. This new discourse then enabled the creation of new subject positions and especially enabled a new range of political actions combined with personal identities which were not available within the confines of the older discourse. These new actions and identities might have been imaginable but they were not practically do-able as continuously coherent *subject positions* in social life until the creation of the new discourse.

As can be seen in this example the stabilisation of a new nodal point involves the interweaving of new ideas and the narratives enabling the dissemination of these ideas with existing social actors, material resources and meaning resources. This interweaving creates new subject positions with their associated new patterns of access to existing resources. In addition, a new nodal point also potentially creates *new* resources – which is the practical goal.

Michel Callon's (1986) example of the scallops of St Brieuc Bay gives us a detailed look at some of the practicalities involved in the stabilisation of a new nodal point. The first stage is 'problematization' (Callon 1986:203): describing an issue or set of circumstances in a specific way which sets up a problem with a potential solution. An important part of this problem-solution formulation is to identify actors whose interests are engaged by the problem, its solution or both. At this stage "The definitions of these actors... is quite rough. However it is sufficiently precise to explain how these actors are necessarily concerned" (1986:204). This stage primarily occurs at a theoretical or abstract level: discussions, written work, reports and so on: "At this point... the entities identified and the relationships envisaged have not yet been tested" (1986:207). Callon's second stage is 'interessement', "the group of actions by which an [hegemonising] entity ... attempts to impose and stabilise the identity of the other actors it defines through its problematization" (1986:207-8). This stage is "the group of multilateral negotiations, trials of strength and tricks" (1986:211) used by the hegemonising group, to which "Each entity enlisted by the problematization can submit to being integrated... or inversely refuse the transaction ..." (1986:207). Callon uses the term 'interessement' as a neologism from the word 'interest': "to interest other actors is to build devices which can be placed between them and all other entities who want to define their identities otherwise" (1986:208).

If interessement is successful (and "success is never assured" (1986:211)) then the third stage of 'enrolment' ensues. This is when "a set of interrelated roles is defined and attributed to actors who accept them" (1986:211). The roles emerge when the speculative problem-solution formulations from the problematization stage become concretised "into a series of statements which are more certain" (1986:211) regarding what actions to take and which actors properly take them. The final stage of "mobilisation" (1986:214) reflects the stabilisation of identifiable subject positions such that they can be readily accessed by others. Callon conceptualises this stage as a matter of individual persons being able to reliably represent a subject position, enabling effective alliances to be formed amongst people who take up that subject position and thus collectively come to count as a significant social force.

This account of the steps to hegemonise a new discourse offers only a brief sketch of the linkages between the level of meaning and the realities of practical action, showing how meaning becomes a powerful concrete social force. The conceptualisation of

discourse offered here is not merely a vehicle for meaning, narrative or language. Rather, discourses organise specific patterns of access to concrete resources via socially recognisable channels, which is one reason why the analysis of discourses offered here can be potentially very helpful in understanding the creation of, and patterns in, social life.

I will now return to my earlier statement that the Connellian framework restricts feminism to merely another subject position in the masculine authority discourse. While of course feminism *is* a subject position in that discourse, at the same time the Connellian framework fails to count feminism as a new and separate discourse of gender in social life with its own independent existence and thus its own coherences and access to resources. This is one drawback to claiming that one discourse entirely specifies all aspects of gender in social life. Connell's singular focus on only the discourse of masculine authority thus elides feminism's shaping impact on social life. As a result the Connellian approach fails to perceive the political potential to link existing feminist subject positions and authorised masculinity subject positions with the meaning themes and subject positions from other discourses so as to create new discourses with new formulations of 'men'. This failure to perceive the creative potential for progressive change among men is the greatest single deficit of the Connellian framework.

Other conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, Laclau and Mouffe's general claim about democracy is that democracies in which hegemony is recognised as a legitimate social force are able to host an open-ended number of discourses. This means there is no theoretical or structural limit to the number of new discourses which can be created using the techniques of hegemonisation to draw together and stabilise new nodal points and their related new subject positions. And new discourses, unlike new subject positions within existing discourses, are not subsumed into prior or more extensive discourses. Each discourse has its own existence in social life, its own range of resources and thus its own scope for action which is not obliterated even when, as argued in the previous chapter, more extensively resourced discourses momentarily are foregrounded.

Secondly, Laclau and Mouffe repeatedly stress that discourses have no *necessary* relations with each other. Of course discourses inevitably do have *some* relations with each other, but the nature of each relation as well as the range of discourses with which any discourse is in relation, are highly contingent and contextual – shaped by the content of specific meanings, subject positions and material resources. It is here that the element of 'cultural processes' becomes extremely significant in the shaping of social life. Material

resources have material limits since they exist in the material world: one cannot reshape a table to be a saucepan or reshape \$1 to be \$100. In contrast cultural elements such as ideas, narratives and meanings are not so restricted. The tools for their creation are available to everyone, and their impacts can be immediate and galvanising. But these cultural elements do not become part of broader-scale processes until they are distributed via vectors such as the media, commercial products, bureaucratic programs and the like.

Thus the creation of a new discourse is not a matter only of generating new ideas or meanings. A new discourse emerges around its nodal point, which must be stabilised via practical action to harness it with material social resources. Nevertheless the generation of new ideas and meanings is a crucial and unavoidable part of a new nodal point and its discourse. It is here that the absence of ‘necessary relations’ stressed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) comes to the fore. In the example of the emergence of the women and education discourse, a number of themes were harnessed together from existing discourses into a novel configuration – women, equality, rationality and education – and was thus able to make new political claims. There were no overall social or material restrictions placed on which ideas or meanings were available to these activists. The forces shaping the selection of those particular themes revolved around extremely contingent and practical issues: Can we get this to work? Does it make sense? Is this widely inspiring? Who might agree with us? and so on. In other words although access to *material* resources is tied to specific discourses, the *meaning themes* operating within those discourses are not tied solely to the discourses in which they are found. These meaning themes are available throughout social process in an open-ended way, available to be operated on by hegemonising forces as ingredients for new subject positions in existing discourses as well as ingredients for entirely new discourses.

Thirdly this discussion enables a further clarification of the type of change among men called for in this thesis. Connell’s position is that the vast majority of men, occupying roughly the complicit masculinity and hegemonic masculinity subject positions in the masculine authority discourse, inevitably prevent substantial change in gender relations (1987: xiii). In addition the Connellian framework’s construction leads to the conclusion that collective and significant change among these men is impossible because, in Connell’s view, the masculine authority discourse is permanently the entire terrain of gender. Here Connell ignores at least some other highly significant discourses of gender, those of feminism, which have been constructed through the creative linking of

a number of previously unrelated themes and discourses. The construction of new discourses of feminism reframes 'women' and 'men', and thus opens new political and material possibilities.

The basic process of discourse creation sketched in this section is available to be deployed in order to open new possibilities for men and to reframe 'men' along progressive lines which are meaningful and practically available for the majority of men. As noted in Chapter 2 several writers observe considerable restlessness and creativity among men, both at 'men's movement' sites and within the mainstream. Innovative formations are constantly emerging – such as mythopoetic men (Harding 1992), 'inclusive masculinities' (Anderson 2009), pro-feminist men (Pease 2000), Promise Keepers (Gallagher & Wood 2005), the new lad (Richardson 2009), the men able to conduct a 'bromance' (Nikoloutsos 2008), and the 'metrosexual' (Harris & Clayton 2007). All of these rely on or are grounded in already orthodox sites and meanings, as is true of all new discursive effects. At the same time they offer new repertoires of actions, and new possibilities for social relations. But these new formations have significant limitations in fostering substantial progressive change because they are new subject positions within existing discourses, and do not step beyond the nodal point of masculine authority. The nodal proposition that social authority resides with men threads its way through all these formations, giving them their coherence and traction whether they actively support, reject or merely take for granted that nodal point.

However social creativity in relation to men is not inherently restricted because of any structural aspects within masculinity or because in the end patriarchy always manages to reassert itself and trump everything else. Rather, restrictions on the social creativity in relation to men arise from a very understandable *occlusion of imagination*: by and large the discourse of masculine authority has a powerful hold upon our collective imagination to the extent that we accept its nodal proposition and thereby take up a subject position within it, as does Connell.

All new discourses emerge from existing discourses since new meanings are formed through novel bifurcations within existing meanings. And a new nodal point starts off life as a collection of subject positions from existing discourses which are creatively woven together and hegemonised via linkages with practical life. Hence any of the new and emerging subject positions which men are creating and taking up may be creatively employed, alongside any other subject positions, themes and activities in other

social arenas, to create new discourses about men, masculinity, gender relations and so on. These new discourses can, like feminism in certain circumstances, be foregrounded and can thus outflank the masculine authority discourse, enabling substantial change for men and in gender relations. This potential sits there within social life, and it is this potential which could be recognised and actively pursued by sociologists in order to foster progressive change among men.

Domination and gradients in capacity

This section examines 'domination' as an idea and a political practice. Domination is a central feature of the Connellian framework where the "general association of authority" with masculinity transforms into a "single structural fact" of "the global domination of women by men" (Connell 1987). However the relation between women and men which Connell labels here as domination is, from other viewpoints, considered perfectly respectable as a reflection of social order or the natural order. Another example of a similar variety in descriptions of the same social phenomenon is the discursive process enabling feminist calls for women's access to education (Chapter 4). One of the key resources in this feminist project is the notion of equality: feminists acted to equate women's exclusion from education with inequality and hence were able to reframe women's exclusion as an example of men's domination. In this piece of successful feminist activism it would be clearly strategically sensible for the activists seeking access to education to as often as possible attempt to shift the frame of interactions away from men as natural authorities towards men as illegitimate gatekeepers.

The shift of frames which occurs here and the attempts to foreground the feminist discourses and so frame men as illegitimate gatekeepers is an act of politics, just as the foregrounding of the traditional masculine authority discourse and its men as natural authorities is an act of politics. But if descriptions of the same set of circumstances can vary so much, informed by the various politics, how can we describe a set of circumstances in a way which does not necessarily entail a politics? That is, in a contestation about inequality or domination what exactly is it which is being contested and how is that contestation being conducted? Is there in fact any aspect of the situation which is 'beyond politics' and is empirically discoverable external to the political contestation? This section explores these questions.

Laclau and Mouffe point out that three terms are commonly used to describe women's exclusion: subordination, oppression and domination. They propose that each of these terms can be understood to describe a different set of relations. Relations of subordination are those "in which an agent is subjected to the decisions of another" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:153). Relations of subordination are not per se oppressive: "a relation of subordination establishes, simply, a set of differential positions between social agents" (1985:154).

Relations of oppression could be said to exist when relations of subordination "have transformed themselves into sites of antagonisms" (1985:154). That is, one or both parties are attempting to shift the nature of the relating or to shift the constitution of their subject position in relation to the other. Relations of oppression entail at least resistance to change.

Relations of domination emerge when relations of subordination "are considered as *illegitimate* from the perspective, or in the judgement, of a social agent external to them..." (1985:154, emphasis added). The claim of domination thus brings into play the issue of legitimacy by linking the relations of subordination to another discourse. As we have seen, the effectiveness of feminist discourses has rested to a large extent on achieving articulations between extant social patterns and the discourse of equality.

Laclau and Mouffe go on to develop the theme of domination by highlighting the significance of equality as the nodal point of democratic politics precisely because equality's presence enables such articulations around any area of social life. However the argument developed in this section will focus at the other end of Laclau and Mouffe's chain of linked concepts; the issue of subordination. A great deal of social life entails subordinations. For instance relations of subordination are crucial for enabling individuals, groups and organisations to benefit from the massively centralised social systems which produce health, education, communication, commercial products and so on. We are obliged to comply with the entry requirements specified by these systems, and we do so as a matter of course to the extent that many of these entry requirements become integrated into our identities and are a matter of common social interaction.

Subordinations in connection with these massive social systems are of course chronically contested, that is, various oppressions and dominations are proposed, but the vast bulk of transactions occur without contestation. Other extremely widespread subordinations are those between employee and employer, between employee and

supervisor, and between student and teacher. Once again, these subordinations are frequently contested but are also socially and personally vital, and in practice only a minority are contested.

In order to get at the generality of subordination itself, I will examine two other common subordinations that appear to be not so complex: the subordinations between parents and children, and those between a group and a member of the group. At first sight these subordinations may appear to arise from fixed aspects in the relationship: one party (the parent or the group) clearly has more resources than the other party (the child or the individual), and this imbalance is in a sense structural or inevitable: parents are just inevitably older, more skilled or knowledgeable than children, and a group simply outnumbers any individual member.

But in real life things are not so simple. Children (especially but not only teenagers) are widely known to put parents at a disadvantage in some situations or to even chronically control aspects of family life. And any member of a group has the capacity to unilaterally shape the group via charismatic leadership, bullying, or terrorist-like disruptive actions.

The multi-discourse analysis developed in this thesis can help to understand this complexity. Firstly, it can be observed that what at first glance look like structural subordinations are not fully determined by each party's structural position. The ostensibly subordinated party can also unilaterally act to subordinate the other party, and this reversal may not be only momentary. A much better description of this situation is offered in the first section of Chapter 5. The parent/child relation and the group/member relation suggested 'at first sight' are better seen as relations of a 'primary frame' – that is, the ostensible goal of the relations is to create a 'family' or a 'group', like the ostensible goal of a law court is to hear legal cases. This discourse of 'family' or 'group' give the subject positions access to resources specified in the discourse. Thus 'parents' and 'children' have various options open to them and can call on resources to enact those options.

But, as with the various meanings of the labels 'men' or 'women', what is entailed in 'family' can also vary widely amongst families and also within one family. And at the level of a specific family there are myriad other discourses occurring too, specifying the internal and external family relations, the personalities involved and so on. In addition each family member beyond a minimal age incorporates other discourses external to the

family into their identity. As children grow, new subject positions become available to them, and a great deal of childhood play and teenage experimentation is devoted to trying these out for fit and effectiveness. All these intra-family and extra-family discourses are available to be drawn on by family members in family interactions.

In an interaction between a parent and a child, then, the parent may foreground the primary frame in order to command some action from the child: “Get ready for school!” If the subordination proceeds smoothly we may say that the child has granted legitimacy to the parent’s move and taken a corresponding subject position: “Yes Dad.” The discourse in this case is specifying the nature of the subordination between the subject positions and providing access to resources for each subject position to enact the subordination.

However the ‘family’ frame by no means exhausts the subject positions available to each party. The child may contest the command in a wide variety of ways. A simple one is acting unco-operatively but eventually complying – a subject position still within the primary frame of the ‘family’ discourse. In this case the legitimacy of the family discourse and its relations of subordination are not seriously challenged but rather are contested to generate more complex patterns of interaction than simple compliance. But entirely other discourses are also available. Teenagers especially are able to call on other discourses positioning them as no longer subject to parental command or not required to attend school.

The differing effects of these various discourses, that is, the differing results they enable in interaction, comes from the differing resources the discourses give their subject positions access to. A simple way to sum this up is that discourses entail specific *capacities* for their subject positions. This is a major reason why people wish to change frames in social interactions: the foregrounding of another discourse gives people access to other capacities by enabling them to occupy the subject positions of that other discourse.

Not only does foregrounding another discourse give people access to other capacities. Very frequently *differentials* of capacity are specified between the subject positions in a single discourse. The examples used here are the differentials between ‘parent’ and ‘child’ in the ‘family’ discourse, and ‘member’ and ‘group’ in the ‘group’ discourse. The examples of subordination in social systems referred to earlier are at their simplest the differentials of capacity between ‘hospital’ and ‘patient’ in discourses of medicine, or between ‘school’ and ‘student’ in education, and so on. The differentials of

capacity between the subject positions in each of these discourses can be seen as a *gradient in capacity* between the subject positions: one position is created as having lesser capacity than the other.

At a very simple pragmatic level, then, a relation of subordination is a gradient in capacity between two subject positions. Gradients in capacity between subject positions are not inherently unfair or destructive or generate social deficits. Indeed, as we have seen gradients in capacity operate in a very large number of social interactions. Importantly, gradients in capacity can be immensely productive, acting as enablers of relations between social formations with substantially differing capacities such as individuals and major institutions.

As Laclau and Mouffe point out, subordinations or, in my terms, gradients in capacity, are not inherently oppressions or dominations. A gradient in capacity must be actively reframed as oppression, that is, rendered unacceptable, or hegemonised as domination, that is, rendered illegitimate. The resources which enable this hegemonising are available to people via subject positions in discourses outside of the target discourse. To employ once again the example of women's exclusion from education, the exclusion was originally predicated on a gradient in capacity entailed in the discourse of masculine authority which allocates greater authority-capacity to men than women. The deployment of the idea that men are rational because of education reframed the gradient in capacity between 'women' and 'men' as alterable rather than fixed. This move instituted a new set of 'women' and 'men' with a different gradient than the patriarchal 'women' and 'men'. The eventual hegemonising move was to reframe this gradient as illegitimate, in effect eradicating gradients between 'women' and 'men' in the discourse of rationality and gender, and instituting a gradient allocating 'women' greater capacity than 'men' in the discourse of gender equality.

On this account domination or inequality are not in themselves discoverable in concrete social formations. Rather, gradients in capacity are concretely discoverable, and these gradients can then be described in any number of ways including as domination or inequality, or indeed as natural, desirable or inevitable. To describe gradients in capacity in any of these ways is an act of hegemony – leadership and activism, entered into with a particular politics in mind. Of course such activism and politics are perfectly legitimate, and indeed desirable. From the viewpoint of creating adequate social theory, however, as argued in Chapter 1, it is important to be able to distinguish between empirically

discoverable events in social life and the discursive frame through which we view them. The concept of gradients in capacity is intended as a theoretical device to enable clearer analysis of what are commonly politically loaded social arrangements.

In relation to the political aims of this thesis, a consequence of the view developed here is that the inequalities suffered by women and the dominations enacted by men are specific to particular discourses which specify particular meanings and capacities for their subject positions 'women' and 'men'. On this account, the 'domination' of women by men Connell finds in his 'facts in the case' is a record of gradients in capacity. It is precisely here that Connell loses sight of his own analytical lens when he claims that those statistics *demonstrate domination*. He fails to observe that the statistics are framed as such within a specific (feminist) discourse. His view is of course entirely legitimate, but in terms of his project of theorisation the problem is that he takes the statistics showing inequality to *already mean* domination, and thus casts men's domination of women as prior to social process. From here there is no other conclusion that such domination cannot be changed.

A further implication from the concept of gradients in capacity is in how we think of individual persons. Chapter 5 develops the view that a person's identity is an ensemble of subject positions which coheres around the continuity of their body. Each of these subject positions entails specific capacities in relation to the other subject positions in their constitutive discourses – that is, one subject position will have greater capacities than some subject positions and lesser capacities than others. Thus it is incoherent to apply domination, oppression or inequality as a description of actual persons. Such a description fails to these that there are multiple subject positions in an identity, and this aspect is highly significant in terms of the possibilities for substantial social change. Certainly many women do occupy subject positions which are lower in capacity than other subject positions, and frequently at the other end of those gradients are subject positions occupied by men. But at the same time nearly all women occupy at least some subject positions in which they have greater capacities than others. And nearly all men occupy at least some subject positions in which they have lesser capacities than others.

Gradients in capacity can in certain circumstances be transformed into powerful resources for social change. The hegemonic reframing of a gradient as illegitimate, that is, as a domination, is especially significant politically. Because of this potential for reframing existing gradients to suit desired political purposes, when fostering progressive

change among men it is analytically and strategically important to map the terrain of gradients in capacity in much finer detail than is usually the case in gender studies. The difficulties in doing so are not to be underestimated, although it is likely the difficulties are primarily those of conceptualisation rather than access to data.

Defining hegemony and discourse

It is now possible to clarify the definitions of hegemony and discourse developed in this thesis. Laclau and Mouffe (1985:142) contend that hegemony is not a pre-eminent position in an hierarchy, and that this is so because social life is not a closed or defined space over which pre-eminence is possible. 'Society' is itself a discursive creation which has limited traction in being able to define a social space (1985:95). Rather, they argue that if we are to fully unwind the ramifications of Gramsci's original insight regarding the social significance of cultural processes of meaning-creation, then we arrive at a view that hegemony is a style of political contestation characteristic of collectivities in which equality has become a major nodal point of social life (1985:139-141).

Laclau and Mouffe's (1985:136) clearest definition of hegemony sees hegemony requiring two conditions: a) the social collectivity can be divided up into at least two groupings via cultural processes of meaning-creation; and b) the frontier between these groups and their criteria for membership is unstable. In other words a social collectivity must be both sufficiently cohesive and fluid to allow hegemony-style politics. A situation in which two groups are exterior to each other, such as a mediaeval English aristocracy and peasantry or a South African apartheid, cannot rely upon a hegemony-style politics since the two groups are largely defined as physically and topographically separate. Their boundaries are not so amenable to cultural articulations.

This definition alludes to the general social conditions which enable hegemony to operate as a primary way to organise resource distribution in social life distinct from, say, violent repression or inherited social position. However Laclau and Mouffe (1985) argue that there is not one single hegemony which pervades the entire social space. Hegemony is not a position in an overarching social hierarchy. Rather, specific hegemonies emerge from specific articulating practices or discrete discourses. But if this is so, where is the hegemony in a specific discourse? What aspect of a discourse can be said to be its hegemony? And how does this hegemony come to have its force?

Laclau and Mouffe (1985:138) argue the rapid expansion of claims for social inclusion from the 1960s onwards in Western democracies is enabled by the creative new meaning-linkages made legitimate by the nodal issue of equality. However a minimal familiarity with the media is enough to show that there is considerable difference between creating new meanings and those meanings shaping the durable formations in social life. It is relatively easy to tell a new story, to put 'spin' on a set of events, or to promulgate a viewpoint.

These creative innovations of meaning remain just that as long as they have little or no impact on the actions of others. My central contention regarding the nexus between meaning and discourse is that discourses obtain their coherence and thus their purchase on actual social life via hegemonisation, that is, the attainment of hegemony. Hegemony is the situational ability to convey that a social setting, an event or set of social circumstances means *something* and more precisely means *only one particular thing*.

The meanings held to be currently operating by those present at an event is immensely significant to the event because of the relationship between the meanings currently held and the range of actions which can be meaningfully taken. This relationship between meanings and actions is complex. The achievement of hegemony requires the organisation of a sufficient verisimilitude between the meaning and its attendant events. For example, an hegemonised meaning offers us the contention that men have authority, and verisimilitude is achieved when events in unfolding social action appear to bear out this contention. The meaning becomes useful to us because it enables us to navigate an unfolding strip of social action. Taking up that meaning enables us to orient ourselves to the action and participate in a practically workable way.

This 'taking up' of a meaning need not involve acquiescence to or agreement with that meaning. What we take up is a relationship with a nodal statement, in this case that masculinity has social authority, but the relationship with the nodal point may range from enthusiastic support through complicity and grudging acceptance to vociferous opposition. Thus "A hegemonic formation also embraces what opposes it, insofar as the opposing force accepts the system of basic articulations of that formation as something it negates..." (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:139). In other words hegemony is a co-operative support-opposition tension rather than a kind of coercive rule imposed from the top. Any hegemony is co-operative in the sense that the meaning-frame which portrays events to mean one specific thing must be taken up as meaningful by participants in order for it to

appear that that meaning-frame is currently applicable in some relevant way. This co-operation is of course contingent in that it may at any moment be dropped unilaterally by participants in the action. For example a dispute over frames may be launched, or other discourses may be foregrounded.

The importance of verisimilitude, and the fact that people must actively ‘take up’ their engagement with a discourse, means that hegemony is best seen as a very strong but not linear or singular link between meaning and practical action. In Giddens’ (1984) account of the duality of structure, developed by Connell into the concept of ‘practice’ (1987:61-64, 94-95; 1995:72), social action produces structure, and structure in turn provides the conditions for action, as follows:

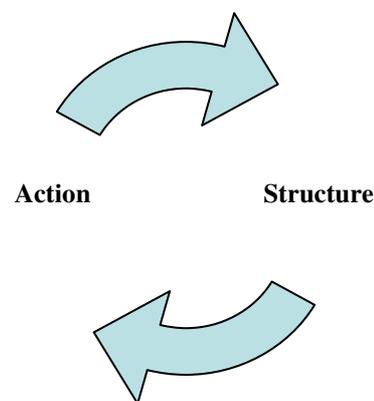


Figure 1

Although Connell subsequently includes the internal process of reflection in his ‘body-reflexive practice’ cycle (1995:59-64), what is not theorised in this primarily materialist account is the very significant process of meaning-creation. People *interpret* both structure and action, that is, people *make meanings* of structures and action. And people take actions which are meaningful. Most significantly for the possibilities for social change, these meanings are not determined by the events and objects themselves: in the realm of meaning-creation, verisimilitude rather than ‘facts’ or ‘truth’ reigns supreme. In other words, there is another step which is missing from Giddens’ structure-action cycle: the crucial step of meaning and interpretation.

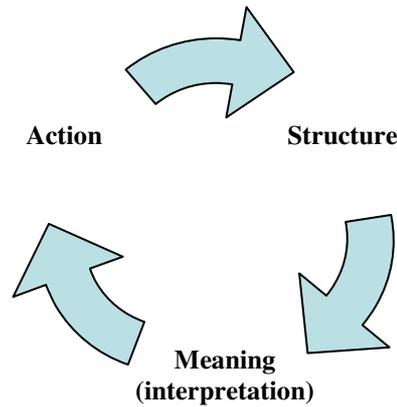


Figure 2

Thus we get the open-ended possibilities in social life which are characteristic of Western democracies: each revolution of the action-structure-meaning cycle entails the inherent and constant potential for innovation. But in the event, as Connell argues (1995:50-51), we are actually a great deal constrained, both from the limits of existing structures, and from emotional and psychological limitations. While these limitations certainly do exist and do have force, they reside as much in the realm of meaning as in the material. Theorising only material or structural processes produces a picture of social process which is overly deterministic. On the other hand theorising cultural processes alone portrays social process as overly fluid. To adequately grasp both the flexibility and tenacity in existing social arrangements both sorts of processes must be theorised, and each sort of process entails constraints of a different quality. We must work with the materiality of bodies, and this materiality in itself cannot be avoided (although the specific shape of a body may be altered by medical procedures). At the same time we are also always working within a collection of meanings about those bodies, and this meaningful aspect enables bodies to be *social*, that is, to become a recognisably meaningful part of social life. Unlike the materiality of bodies, in some moments (for instance in deep meditation, or in partial consciousness) a disengagement from this meaningful aspect occurs, and awareness is reduced to an immersion in the flow of the present, but in doing this we also lose our engagement with *social* life, the aspect of human life we share with other humans.

Meaning is by nature immaterial, but it does not lack force. The force which enables the enduring nature of the familiar formations of social life is a combination of the traction that a *specific* meaning has when we frame the current situation in a

particular way, *combined with* the existing material conditions which by their nature prohibit certain things. In other words social life emerges from actions taken within existing conditions framed within existing meanings. Hegemony, then, has the same sort of force as an established meaning. Part of the force of the established meaning is that it is shared and thus creates verisimilitude. That is, part of the force of hegemony is that the established meaning has become attached to specific material objects and patterns of action so that they appear to mean one thing.

It is here that the concept of discourse becomes relevant. The open-endedness characteristic of Western social life arises because the element of meaning occurs in the action-structure-meaning cycle (Figure 2 above). Meaning is inherently unstable and must be reaffirmed at every turn. Durable social formations (i.e. structures) are able to be created when, at every reiteration of this cycle, a single meaning is actually reaffirmed by the social agents enacting the cycle. This iterated reaffirmation appears to have a compelling force precisely because the terrain of meaning has become closed – that is, the patterns of actions and the formation itself appear to have only one possible meaning. This closure is the source and effect of hegemony, as discussed above. It is when the general cycle of action-structure-meaning becomes anchored in a *single* meaning that a discourse can be said to have come into existence.

A discourse, then, is when a specific pattern of actions and a specific social formation are associated with a single meaning, or when the inherent openness of the action-structure-meaning cycle has become closed around a single meaning. In my deployment of the term, the terrain of a discourse can be delineated by tracing all the actions which become meaningful or make sense in relation to a single proposition about the world or nodal point. This covers actions which agree with *and reject* the nodal proposition, since both require that same nodal point to make sense. At the same time, it can be seen that more than one discourse can be in play simultaneously in relation to the same pattern of actions and their related social formations.

Creating a new discourse with its associated closure of meaning involves the process called ‘hegemonisation’, by which specific meanings become associated with specific actions or clusters of actions at specific social sites. A stereotypical example from the workplace is the reassignment of the male boss pinching the female junior’s bottom as sexual harassment. An example in personal identity comes from women’s movement consciousness-raising groups, one of whose effects was to support women to reframe

certain experiences as examples of sexism rather than indicators of personal failure or of women's 'natural' inadequacy.

The paths by which these new meanings become anchored to the associated acts, that is, the process of hegemonisation, is long and convoluted, and has only been sketched in this thesis (see Section I above). Crucially, as Clegg (1989) suggests, hegemonisation involves organisation. In addition, for large scale discourses such as those addressing gender, hegemonisation extensively involves the media, arts and entertainment industries as key vectors to portray aspects of social life and strips of social action as framed by the desired meanings.

Crucially, the creation of a new discourse does not necessarily change its constitutive social structures immediately. Because the action-structure-meaning cycle is iterative, the change in meaning may have an immediate effect on people's actions, but the fact that repeated patterns of actions become sedimented into durable formations with their spatial and temporal arrangements of material objects means that the emergence of a new discourse may not necessarily be marked by instantaneous radical change. Foucault's delineations of the major discourses of governmentality (1991), bodily discipline (1977), and clinical practice (1973) exemplify how coming to see existing social formations through a new frame of meanings can gradually yet inexorably spread across entire national spaces, generating novel and unexpected social formations but over periods of decades rather than days or weeks.

In terms of gender the hegemonisation of new discourses is profoundly significant in enabling the changes already wrought by twentieth century feminism, and in potentially enabling changes among men. In the face of women's relative lack of economic and political clout women's liberationists and feminists have been able to address women's formal delegitimations by hegemonising new meanings of 'women', both as new subject positions in existing discourses and as subject positions in entirely new discourses. Although sexism and gender inequality still exist the new feminist discourses have unquestionably substantially changed the gender terrain. In other words feminist social activism is an excellent and relevant example of the effective deployment of hegemony. The key aspect to note here is that older-style structuralist interpretations of hegemony would portray women as lacking the resources to exercise or achieve hegemony. Yet women have done so, and continue to do so, enabled by the two crucial ways in which hegemony escapes structural control: the importance of verisimilitude

above material reality, and the uncertainty involved because people must actively take up meanings, subject positions and nodal points.

This redefinition of hegemony has profound implications in relation to fostering progressive change among men. Connell's limited interpretation of hegemony leads to his conclusion that most men can have no interest in changing men's privilege. Yet the open-endedness of meaning enables privilege to be framed as oppressive or otherwise undesirable for the privileged, while interests can become vested in a variety of social goals. These possibilities will be discussed in the final chapter.

However as a preliminary to that discussion it is necessary to reframe the Connellian framework and to explore what such a reframing may enable in terms of an expanded understanding of gender and men. This will be the task of the next chapter.