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Institutions and Political Strategy in Post-Marxist Discourse Theory: A Reply to Pedro Rey-Araújo

Thomas Jacobs

This reply to Pedro Rey-Araújo's essay "Ernesto Laclau's Oblivion of Political Economy" appreciates the importance of Rey-Araújo's attempt to situate political strategy at the core of post-Marxist discourse theory (PDT) but finds several problems with the execution of this move. First, Rey-Araújo sets out to resolve PDT's so-called "institutional deficit" but overlooks the existence of a substantial literature tackling this issue. Second, Rey-Araújo's treatment divorces institutions from the hegemonic logics that play out within their confines. This ontological dualism negates the crucial insight that PDT brings to institutional research, notably that institutions are fundamentally discursive in nature and cannot be separated from the political processes that constitute them. Finally, this ontological dualism unduly limits the scope for strategic reflection through PDT. In postulating the inherently capitalist nature of the institutions within which hegemonic struggles play out, several potential political strategies are foreclosed.

Key Words: Ernesto Laclau, Institutions, Political Economy, Political Strategy, Post-Marxism

Pedro Rey-Araújo's (2020) essay "Ernesto Laclau's Oblivion of Political Economy: Capitalism and Institutions in Post-Marxist Discourse Theory" makes an important contribution to the enduring debate about the relation between Marxism and post-Marxist discourse theory (PDT). I am particularly interested in his argument that if PDT wants to claim "any strategic value in political terms, a conceptual structure must be provided that enables apprehending the differential constraints and opportunities derived from the institutional environment in which it necessarily operates, as well as the differential degree of resilience of its building blocks" (192). Rey-Araújo assumes here that PDT's added value for critical and Marxist research revolves around the potential of its poststructuralist theory of hegemonic politics to facilitate strategic reflection. He effectively argues that PDT can contribute to the Marxist tradition by helping it think more clearly about which political strategies are appropriate in which circumstances. PDT gives us a framework to conceptualize the existing political, social, economic, and institutional conditions in terms that then allow us to reason about how

various strategies are likely to play out in these conditions. While it is not the first time that this assumption has been formulated (see Marchart 2004, 55–6; Nonhoff 2019; Jacobs 2020b), its consequences and implications have not yet been thought through to their full extent, and Rey-Araújo takes an important step in pushing forward this pertinent line of inquiry in the discourse-theoretical literature.

Rey-Araújo (2020, 188) proceeds to ask how PDT's potential as a theory of political strategy can be exploited, arguing that PDT needs a "satisfactory account of the institutional realm wherein hegemonic logics are immersed and, crucially, the specifically capitalist dimension of those institutional ensembles" in order to do so. It is here, however, that Rey-Araújo's essay takes what is in my opinion a triple wrong turn. First and foremost, it faults PDT with an "institutional deficit" while it almost completely overlooks the substantial literature in PDT that addresses this issue (194). Second, by divorcing "hegemonic logics" from the "institutional realm wherein" they "are immersed" (188), it negates PDT's key contribution to institutional analysis: notably, the insight that "there are no qualitative distinctions between discourses, only differences in their degree of stability" (Howarth 2000, 120). Put differently, this move creates a dualism between hegemonic politics, on one hand, and the institutional context in which these politics play out, on the other. But such a dualism is alien to PDT's monist ontological infrastructure. Third, and finally, this incompatibility entails Rey-Araújo's suggestion that institutional ensembles have a specifically capitalist character, which cannot be accepted. As he points out himself, the Marxist theory of political economy and the interpretation of PDT as a theory of political strategy operate on different epistemological levels, with the latter situated at a higher level of abstraction (191). Hence, the institutional context in which hegemonic logics play out as understood by Rey-Araújo, as necessarily and specifically capitalist, unduly narrows the scope for strategic reflection that PDT provides.

Throughout this essay, I will tackle these three issues in this order, contending that, while they are problematic and in need of resolving, they do not jeopardize the core of Rey-Araújo's case.

From Institutional Deficit to Poststructuralist Institutionalism

"Ernesto Laclau's Oblivion of Political Economy" presupposes that PDT cannot account for the role of institutions in hegemonic struggles. Rey-Araújo (2020, 191) approvingly quotes Mouzelis's (1988, 116) famous claim that "Laclau and Mouffe ... analyze practices in an institutional vacuum" while he dismisses Laclau's arguments to the contrary. As such, in order to prevent the "ultimate strategic value" of PDT from going to waste, Rey-Araújo (2020, 203) sets out to solve its "institutional deficit."

This is an important enterprise, for it is evident that understanding the "varying degrees of resistance and/or proclivity to change of the various institutional

components of a social order” and “apprehending the differential constraints and opportunities derived from the institutional environment” are core elements of any successful strategic reflection (Rey-Araújo 2020, 192). This enterprise is in fact so important to PDT’s viability as a social theory that several discourse theorists have already dedicated themselves to this task. A substantial literature addresses and resolves PDT’s institutional deficit (Jacobs 2018, 300–1). Unfortunately, Rey-Araújo overlooks it almost completely.

The original elaboration of PDT’s institutional deficit—which is more commonly known as the “problem of institutions”—goes back to the work of Allan Dreyer Hansen. Hansen (2008, 5, 17) believed that “Laclau’s discourse theory ... provide[s] a promising—i.e. coherent—way of approaching the tricky question of institutions,” but he maintained that Laclau’s conception of institutions as merely systems of difference falls short. He essentially contends that PDT has all the necessary infrastructure to theorize the functioning of institutions in a post-structuralist fashion, but he deplores that Laclau has neglected to explicate this theorization conceptually (Hansen 2014). From this point of view, Laclau (1990, 223; see Rey-Araújo 2020, 191), strictly speaking, was correct when he argued that “institutions are fully present in our approach: they are what we have called systems of differences,” but Rey-Araújo is equally justified in his claim that PDT “requires a more nuanced treatment of institutions than that provided by collapsing every existing institution under the common banner of ‘systems of differences’” (196). Quite simply, Laclau’s theories never really suffered from an institutional deficit or a problem of institutions; his implicit understanding of institutions was merely in need of exegesis.

More than a decade later, this exegesis has for the most part taken place, and we have laid the foundations of an explicit discourse-theoretical conception of institutions. Its hinge is PDT’s understanding of institutions as discursive in nature (Jacobs 2019). For PDT, institutional phenomena are not qualitatively different from any other articulatory practice. Instead, institutions are discourses whose fundamentally political and contingent character has disappeared from sight and been forgotten, stabilizing into what we understand as unchanging norms (Larsson 2015, 189; 2018; Jacobs 2018, 300–1). This process is known as “sedimentation,” which Stavrakakis (2010, 79–81) illustrates by a rich description of the origins of the consumerism that has animated capitalism since the 1950s. Initially eroding the more puritan and protestant ascetism that preceded it, consumerism finally supplanted these as the “spirit of capitalism.” Its sedimented status ensures that consumerism is unwittingly and unquestioningly reproduced by all of us in our day-to-day lives, despite its fundamentally contingent character. However, sedimentation merely hides an institution’s political and discursive character; it does not undo it. The fixation of institutions as stable features of social life always remains relative and precarious (Laclau 1990, 41–2, 60–1).

International arbitration and dispute settlement were, for example, once relatively obscure and technical institutions of economic globalization—right until

mass mobilizations in the EU against international trade agreements with Canada and the United States (the so-called Stop TTIP and Stop CETA movements) put these institutions at the center of a political maelstrom within the EU (Gheyle and De Ville 2017). If we were to consider institutions as the context in which political struggles play out, a discourse-theoretical perspective could alert us to the fact that the two can never be completely separated: “Instead of a dualistic vision of social relations connecting two positive entities, ‘agents’ and ‘structures,’ what we have are relative degrees of institutionalization” (Hansen 2008, 6). Put simply, we cannot think of politics and institutions as two different and distinct ontological realms in which the latter constrains the former; both are part of the encompassing process of the hegemonic struggle. Political struggles can in no way be divorced from the institutional context in which they take place, and institutional contexts can in no way be divorced from the political struggles that shape them.

Hegemonic Logics and Their Strategic Context from a Monist Perspective

The solution that Rey-Araújo (2020) arrives at is quite different from the one that I just outlined. His insistence on the need for “institutional analyses capable of informing the terrain upon which hegemonic logics operate” illustrates that he does distinguish political struggles for hegemony from the settings in which these struggles play out (203; see also 187–90, 193–4, 204). He explicitly wagers that a nuanced treatment of institutions “cannot be provided by collapsing every single institution under the common banner of ‘systems of difference’” (192). In his account, the institutional terrain within which hegemony is contested seems to have an innate character (i.e., capitalist) that precedes, embeds, and “informs” any ensuing struggle (203). This move effectively separates political struggles from their contexts and posits the latter as *a priori* to the former.

This avenue has not gone unexplored in the discourse-theoretical literature.¹ But as Larsson (2015, 193) argues, seeing the discourse of political practices as one variable that depends on or operates alongside others (such as *a priori* existing institutions) undoes the constitutive character of discourse in PDT’s ontology. The separation of institutions and discourse into two distinct categories effectively negates the most crucial aspect of PDT’s theorization of institutions: notably, its ontological monism (Jacobs 2019, 394). A formal distinction between hegemonic logics as capturing the struggle for political change and institutions as the terrain in which these struggles are waged is thus, strictly speaking, incompatible with PDT’s theory of discourse.

A paradox presents itself. On one hand, we cannot make a qualitative distinction between institutions and political practices, as PDT conceptualizes both

1. Compare Rey-Araújo (2020, 196) to, e.g., Moon (2013).

through the notion of discourse. But, on the other hand, we need to recognize how institutions shape and affect the outcomes and opportunities of a variety of possible political strategies, as Rey-Araújo rightly argues. A logics framework (Glynos and Howarth 2007), which is the most popular approach for operationalizing PDT, provides us with a way to achieve both goals simultaneously, through its distinction between political and social logics, both of which describe tendencies in discourses that constitute hegemonic struggles: political logics capture contestation, conflict, antagonism, and politicization while social logics capture sedimentation, objectification, depoliticization, and institutionalization.

Crucial to note is that political and social logics do not give different essences to the practices that they analyze; they merely indicate the respective vector and effect of these practices. Political logics and social logics effectively form two poles of a gradient upon which discourses oscillate without ever completely reaching one pole. The discourses that comprise political struggle thus feature dynamics in different directions: some move toward stabilization and institutionalization, restricting the scope for change; some move toward politicization and antagonism, creating openness to change (Jacobs 2019). But while a social logic's tendency toward stabilization and institutionalization evidently affects political logics engaged with it, social logics neither precede nor surround hegemonic struggles. Rather, they are shaped and produced by them.

Discourse and Capitalism

The difference between the monist ontology that I argue for here and the dualist ontology proposed by Rey-Araújo is more than a theoretical technicality. An ontological separation between institutions and political struggles risks limiting the scope for strategic reflection. It frames political struggles as pitched battles in a pregiven landscape. But what makes PDT unique is that it considers the topography of the battlefield as an integral part of the struggle. Various political projects can attempt to advantageously reshape the outlook of the topography in which they vie for hegemony by trying to rearticulate the functioning of extant institutions in a way that benefits their cause (Jacobs 2020a). PDT not only gives us the tools to think about how to play a political chess match but also alerts us to the fact that the rules of political chess are not set in stone but are subject to change.

Let us take, for example, Rey-Araújo's (2020, 198, 199) account of the "lower hegemonic depth enjoyed nowadays by 'class' qua political identity." He argues that the waning of class politics can be explained by the notion of "class qua social process" and that "it is precisely the category of class that can make those phenomena intelligible in a coherent and structured manner." Warning firmly against "ignoring the sort of epistemological structuration of the social space that the category of class enables," Rey-Araujo explains a political dynamic (the

declining political relevance of class) by reference to a preexisting social formation (class qua social process). He effectively assumes a priori that class is an institutional formation whose essence lies partially beyond the scope of the hegemonic struggle.

I, on the other hand, argue that what class is, means, and implies is constructed within this struggle. Rey-Araújo's move significantly reduces the number of options that a strategic reflection can consider. Postulating that the reduced political salience of class qua political identity is necessarily driven by the established institution of class as a social process removes from consideration a wide range of alternative explanations, such as, for instance, the politicization and reactivation of the institution of class, in which class identities find their roots.

An operationalization of PDT's monist ontology through a logics framework can facilitate an account of this phenomenon that avoids recourse to a separation of institutions from the hegemonic struggle in which they are constructed, and therefore this operationalization avoids unduly limiting the breadth of strategic reflection. From a discourse-theoretical point of view, once we observe the decreasing effectiveness of political logics revolving around the signifier "class," we can speculate that a potential cause could be the weakening of class institutions. If the terrain constituted by the social logics of class structures is indeed becoming less supportive of class politics due to the politicization of these social logics, a variety of strategic remedies can be considered: do we try to restabilize the social logics constituting class processes, thereby reinstitutionalizing class and creating a new foundation for class struggle? Or do we reformulate our class politics in a way that fits the changing social logics of class? Or do we abandon class politics altogether and fully adapt our political strategy to the transformation of the institutional domain? The answer is of course contextual, but regardless of which strategy one picks, all three are beyond the consideration of a dualist approach that reifies class's institutional status by divorcing it from the hegemonic struggle in which this status is constituted.

Rey-Araújo (2020, 191) observes that Marxist political economy and PDT's theoretical apparatus "operate at qualitatively different levels of abstraction." I agree with him in this regard, but I understand PDT as a more general theory of political strategy in society and Marxist political economy as a more particular theory of the economic sphere of the social world, whereas Rey-Araújo swaps them around and frames Marxist political economy as more abstract than PDT.

PDT is not used as a way to explicate the strategic processes constituting social structures of accumulation; rather, discourse-theoretical insights are used inside the scope of the extant structures, which themselves escape the hegemonic struggle taking place within their confines. The "specifically capitalist dimension" of "institutional ensembles" and "societies" (Rey-Araújo 2020, 188, 190, 193) is not understood as the product of a discursive process; discursive construction instead takes place within the immaculate structures of these formations. My worry is

that the latter approach heavily restricts the space in which PDT can formulate strategic insights.

Since replies often paint a rather negative picture of the thinking to which they respond, I want to emphasize that I see Rey-Araújo's essay "Ernesto Laclau's Oblivion of Political Economy" as a very important contribution to the literature. Understanding Laclau's theories as a framework for strategic reflection and using them to highlight the political and hegemonic roots of the economy as a social sphere are two crucial steps forward for PDT. It is precisely because I want to maximize their added value that I have written this reply. A discourse-theoretical approach to political-economic strategies is too promising to undo the monist resolution of its institutional deficit or to bracket off the institutional from discursive constitution in a vain attempt to position capitalism's institutions as preceding hegemonic struggle.

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