

JA 1.E691



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ESSEX PAPERS IN POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT  
 SUB-SERIES IN IDEOLOGY AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS  
 Number 11  
**From Identity to Identification:  
 Discourse Theory and Psychoanalysis in Context**  
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Essex Papers in Politics  
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Author ESSEX PAPERS IN POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT NO. 11	
Title J. Glynos	
Class Mark JA 1.E691	Book No. 0059 0942 2



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November 1999

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Tel: 01206 872737

ISBN 1 898280 55 X-

JA 1. E691  
(ESS. 11)



0059 0942 2

#### Abstract

In this paper I describe some of the main features of a psychoanalytically-informed discourse theory, including the potential fruitfulness of maintaining a distinction between symbolic *identification* on the one hand and symbolic *identity* on the other. I draw on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek to argue that such a discourse-theoretic approach presents an insightful perspective not only regarding the analysis of political phenomena such as the formation and diversity of ecological movements but also regarding its own relationship with other approaches to political analysis.

## From Identity to Identification: Discourse Theory and Psychoanalysis in Context<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

As the phrase implies, 'discourse analysis' is a form of *analysis*; and it concerns the analysis of *discourse*. The simplistic nature of this opening statement, however, conceals a high degree of complexity, a complexity whose intimations we sense as soon as we begin to unpack its contents. This is not only because of the multitude of discourse analytic idioms, either generally or within the field of political theory more specifically, but also due to the typically rich theoretical underpinnings of such an approach. In this paper I draw primarily on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek to outline some basic features of a psychoanalytically-informed approach to discourse analysis. In doing so I also try, in general terms, to articulate a relation between this perspective and other stances *vis-a-vis* political analysis in order to highlight several methodological consequences of adopting one rather than another ontology. In addition, from within a discourse theoretic perspective, I stress the importance of keeping distinct the Lacanian idea of symbolic *identification* from the now commonplace discourse-analytic category symbolic *identity*. By invoking the ecological movement as an example, I suggest that discourse analysis can benefit from such a distinction.

### Discourse and Symbolic Identity

Unsurprisingly, a discourse-theoretic approach takes discourse as its prime fundament. But what exactly *is* discourse? To answer this question, Ernesto Laclau draws primarily on the following sources: Saussurian structuralism, Derridean deconstruction, and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Saussure rejected conceptions of language premised upon motivational considerations or nomenclaturist ideals. His elaboration of language as a system of differences made it possible to extend linguistic categories to traditionally non-linguistic elements. Following in the footsteps of Saussure as presented in his *Course in General Linguistics*,<sup>2</sup> Hjelmslev,<sup>3</sup> Barthes,<sup>4</sup> and Levi-Strauss<sup>5</sup> soon realized that so long as elements were indispensable in the generation of meaning, and this on account of their difference from other elements, language could be generalized beyond what had become the stock and trade of linguists:



words. Now *any* element (whether sound-, sight-, touch-, taste-, or scent-based) can be considered discursive, so long as it enters into relation with at least one other such element. This expansion can be seen to justify the introduction of a new term to describe these elements which would make their specific material base irrelevant, namely, the now-familiar signifier. A smile, for instance, insofar as it is *meaningful*, functions as a signifier. Whether we call this newly conceived domain a (generalized) language or discourse is purely terminological. The main point is that the analysis of discourse involves the study of signifiers and their relations. To put it in Lacanian terms, identity is seen not in its imaginary dimension (ie., in terms of positive properties residing in the element itself) but rather in terms of a symbolic identity (in terms of differences established with respect to a set of elements). Discourse analysts, therefore, subscribe to the Barthian idea which can be put as follows: 'Where there is meaning, there is a system of signifiers to be analysed.'

Saussure's insights, therefore, led to a fundamental shift in the way we conceive language and systems of meaning. For a start, it made problematic the readiness with which we were inclined to separate so-called 'concrete reality' (or 'external reality') from its meaning; for concrete reality (whatever bit of it we are keen to examine) is already participating in a system responsible for its meaning, including its status as factual. This is not to deny the existence of extra-discursive reality (discourse theorists, after all, often have a strongly materialist bent), but only to say that *meaningful* reality is always discursive.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, insofar as meaningful reality, in all its differentiated splendour, is a constitutive feature of our distinctly human experience, language can no longer be conceived as simply a tool with which we express pre-given ideas, interests, or states of affairs. Language or discourse becomes intimately linked with, indeed constitutive of, our thoughts, beliefs, and identities, including external reality.<sup>7</sup>

But if this is the case, are we not led into an ultimately circular vortex of signifiers from which there is, ultimately, no escape? Does not our 'enlightened' recognition that external reality is always-already discursively articulated simply sweep away a naive conception of a heterogeneous external reality only to replace it with a homogenized fabric of signifiers continuous with our everyday meaningful experiences? Does this acknowledgement not come with far too high a price to pay, namely, a claustrophobically closed signifying structure? It is at this point that the Derridean intervention demonstrates its pertinence. By invoking deconstructive techniques, Laclau demonstrates that careful analysis of the notion of the signifier or, alternatively, the limits of discourse, yields an insight with profound implications. He demonstrates that the differential logic of the signifier, when taken seriously, necessarily relies, in order to function *as* such a logic, upon a necessary exclusion (Derrida's 'constitutive outside') that no signifying element (signifier) can ever hope to

tame *in principle*.<sup>8</sup> This can be demonstrated in very precise terms whose mathematical analogue is none other than Godel's 1931 incompleteness theorem. This means that no signifying structure can ever succeed in closing in on itself -- it is irreducibly open.<sup>9</sup>

Let me be a little more precise, even at the risk of complicating things. It turns out after a thorough analysis of the nature of systems of signification that they possess a fundamental structural property which can be described as a 'state of the permanent intimation of a beyond.' The crucial point, not to be missed here, is that this is posited as a structural property of *all* systems of signification; more specifically, it marks a fundamental limit whose status is *necessarily* undecidable. For, on the one hand, this limit is *internal* to the system (it is from *within* the system of signifiers that the intimation issues forth); while on the other hand, it points toward something *beyond* it (the intimation *qua* vector is oriented *outward*). And Lacan has a precise term for this paradoxical property peculiar to the logic of the signifier: *extimacy* (thus indicating how the notion of externality coincides with the idea of innermost intimacy).

Now, such a discourse-theoretic approach presents itself as an alternative to realist and idealist world-views.<sup>10</sup> As the typical outlook of today's scientific establishment, realism possesses an onto-epistemology in which there exists a describable extra-discursive reality against which we could judge the accuracy of our ideas about it. It subscribes to a hard-nosed distinction between objective facts and subjective ideas and values. Idealism, on the other hand, I take to possess an onto-epistemology in which the only thing we can be sure about are our subjective ideas. In this view, it is against shared ideas that we can assess the merits of what attempts to pass itself off as true. In both cases, there is a clear resting place, a readily identifiable grid against which idealists and realists can pass judgments. In both cases, however, the role of language is seen as instrumental. The discourse theoretic approach began to exert its appeal as soon as the effects of the linguistic turn at the turn of the twentieth century took hold in the 1950s -- in other words, as soon as our view of the role of language suffered the instrumental-to-constitutive inversion.

### From Discursive Identity to Symbolic Identification

We are now in a better position to identify the impasse that immediately confronts this particular discourse-theoretic stance. For the constitutive nature of discourse appears to leave us with no firm ground to stand upon. It thereby ushers in the spectre of an anarchic relativism. Having no longer a distinct hard place to take our judgmental bearings from, or so it would seem, it is easy to see why idealism and realism could quickly reassert their appeal.



But it is precisely at this point that it is all important to press ahead. For it is the stake of a psychoanalytically-informed discourse theory that its linguistic foundations can be maintained while avoiding falling back upon either the Scylla of objectivism or the Charybdis of subjectivism. And in so doing, it brings forth an alternative ontology. How is this suggestion to be realized? At the outset, we recall how a thorough inquiry into the nature of signifying systems brought to our attention a crucial insight: that every set of signifiers relies upon a fundamental exclusion, an exclusion that is as constitutive of the system as signifiers are of objective identity. The crucial dimension is here to be found in the idea that it is the limits of the system, not the system itself, that shifts into the limelight. The difference is as momentous as the difference between poststructuralism and structuralism. For it is the impossibility of directly signifying those limits that ushers in a novel ontology. We know that the introduction into the structure of a new element only expands the system; it does not signify it.<sup>11</sup> This is why only a change of signifying modality is up to the task. Only the subversion of signification can properly point to the limits of the system. Hence discourse theory's ontology of lack, dislocation, antagonism, failure.<sup>12</sup> If the limits of the system are a property of the system, and if what is therefore excluded has no positive identity, they cannot be evoked but by a negative gesture of subversion. The system of signifiers constitutively lacks the resources with which to complete the system. Hence the notion of structural lack, which from the Lacanian perspective is the symbolic face of the social subject.<sup>13</sup> The system of signification is constitutively dislocated; which is why, phenomenologically speaking, the only proper way to index its identity as a whole is through a failure to fully establish itself as a closed totality.

Nevertheless, this state of affairs is not without its theoretically awkward surprises. It is here that the psychoanalytic intervention can be clearly seen. For the very play of signifying differences, the very production of an always-partially constituted symbolic identity, relies on a paradoxical signifier that marks this constitutive dislocation, this impossibility of finding a signifier capable of closing the system for good. Identifying with this (master) signifier is what I shall call symbolic identification, as distinct from symbolic identity. To be clear: symbolic identity refers primarily to the differential *value* attaching to an 'ordinary', partially fixed signifier. This value is established as a result of its difference from other ordinary signifiers within a set constituted-marked by the master signifier. As we will see in more detail in the next section, the partial fixity of ordinary signifiers has, as its condition of possibility, the emergence of an enigmatic master signifier which appears, in inverted form, as the guarantee of a complete system. The master signifier in effect serves as a ballast in an otherwise relativistic sea.

### Political Analysis and the Master Signifier

Perhaps we can already see the significance of a psychoanalytically-informed discourse-theoretic approach for political analysis. First, however, let me be clear about what I mean by approach. An approach I take to be, at the very least, an explicit or implicit articulation between an (ontological) world-view and (methodological) idiom(s), an articulation which will also have the effect of adumbrating the contours of a general epistemological stance.<sup>14</sup> Thus, a social ontology founded on lack suggests why hegemony becomes a central political category within a discourse-theoretic approach. In this view, and by way of articulating a minimal methodology, the task of the political analyst is first to register the various phenomenal instantiations of dislocation in the socio-political fabric. In other words, the discourse analyst's starting point is not the mapping of preconstituted, positively-defined, theoretical categories (rational self-interested ends, structural functions, competing lobbying interests, juridico-political forms of economic relations, typologies of democracies, forms of identity, etc.) onto the socio-political landscape, and then invoking tools from corresponding idioms to conduct an analysis. And here I wish to avoid a fundamental misunderstanding. I am not at all suggesting that these theoretical categories and tools are not relevant to political analysis. Far from it. Instead, I am suggesting that a discourse-analytic ontology articulates these idioms in a fundamentally different way. When dislocation and failure become ontologically foundational, the idioms with which we describe and analyse political phenomena change modality. Likewise, an individualist or structuralist ontology will result in idioms (ie., theoretical categories and/or analytical tools) being articulated to political phenomena differently. Discourse theory's anti-essentialist stance is thus maintained by adopting an ontology of lack, this being a direct consequence of taking seriously the constitutive nature of discourse in human practices. Moreover, by pushing its theoretical investigations to a very high level of formalization, its reach stretches to include all idiomatic efforts to come to grips with human activities, thereby blurring the boundary between those belonging to political actors and those of political theorists themselves.

Once the discourse analyst (with a psychoanalytically-informed discourse-theoretic ontology) has thus identified the phenomonic instantiations of dislocation (the most succinct index of the social subject), he or she begins to study the mechanisms by which political actors attempt to heal this rift. It is here that the analytical potential of the category of hegemony comes clearly to the fore. For hegemony bespeaks of a political relation in which a concrete political principle, policy, or identity, begins to spread throughout the socio-political field. It refers to a specific kind of relation holding between the particular and the universal -- a contingent relation made possible



by the ultimately missing signifier which would otherwise directly signify the limits of the system as a whole and thus forever seal the gap that separates them. It is precisely *because* no signifier can ever fulfil this bridging function that contingency enters into the fray and that power becomes a necessary ingredient in political contestation. Political analysis, from a discourse-theoretic point of view, then, includes the study of the strategies and tactics deployed in constructing universalizing chains of equivalence and/or in disrupting them.<sup>15</sup>

The important thing to keep in mind, and this is the critical insight that Laclau and Lacan's Saussurianism offers political analysis, is that discourse theory's 'resting place', its paradoxical Archimedean point from which it takes its cue, thereby making non-relativistic critical analysis possible, is not a positively determined substance, but instead the very failure of discursive substance to ever achieve final closure -- in short, it takes dislocation as constitutive.

Nevertheless, despite this ontologically constitutive dislocation, it is obvious that we are not in our everyday experiences confronted with perennial disorder. What then holds the discursive space together? In order to remain faithful to our negative ontology, we will not be surprised to discover that responsibility for such order lies with a paradoxical anchoring point, what Lacan calls the master signifier<sup>16</sup> -- a signifier which refers not to some external foundation, but rather to the impossibility of ever successfully establishing itself as hegemonic without remainder.<sup>17</sup> And here we can fully appreciate the reasons governing Lacan's choice of phrase to describe this 'master' signifier, namely, the *point-de-capiton* (quilting point) or 'button tie'. As a Lacanian scholar explains,

[a] button tie, in the upholsterer's vocabulary, is a type of stitch used to secure a button to fabric and stuffing in a couch or chair, whereby the button and fabric are held together not in reference to a wooden or steel frame but simply in reference to one another. There is no true anchoring here, strictly speaking, since an anchor suggests an unmovable terra firma to which something is attached. Rather, the result of the [*point-de-capiton*] is to tie a specific meaning to particular words without regard to an absolute referent (that is, without appealing to a mythical absolute reality beyond the reality created, or hewn from the real, by language).<sup>18</sup>

This means that the elevation of an element within a system to its status as stand-in for the system as a whole owes nothing to any such thing as the naive notion of an external concrete reality. Instead its success as hegemonic can only be plausibly accounted for through a careful analysis of the tactics governing its relation to other signifiers within the socio-political fabric. Ultimately, the hegemonic element holds itself up by its own boot-straps. Moreover, it is only because the structure is never at peace with itself, only because it is never able to finally close itself off by providing us with an ultimate

signifier, that shifting meanings and political change is possible. How? To repeat: through the institution of a paradoxical master signifier whose job it is to pretend to close off the signifying field. In short, the system is constituted through pretence, or to use the Lacanian term, through 'semblance.' The master signifier functions as such only insofar as it simultaneously stands for the system's constitutive incompleteness *and* covers over this impossibility-to-complete (thereby holding out the possibility of full closure). It is crucial to realize that its fictional status, its pretence, far from being a source of despair, is what *enables* the constitution of systems (even if open). It is what makes the very production of meaning possible (even if always partially-fixed).

### Some General Methodological and Epistemological Implications

At this point, I can more clearly draw out the methodological and epistemological implications of adopting this ontological stance. In order to clarify these implications it is worth recalling the benefit of discourse-theory's highly formalized conceptual framework. The main benefit resides in the fact that it can subsume, in principle at least, all idioms into its ambit of study, whether empirical or normative, whether quotidian or academically sophisticated. But this may also be seen as a serious failing. For, so the objection might proceed, does not this high level of theoretical formalization come at too high a price, namely, a correspondingly increased poverty of analytical grip?

This line of argument, though it may strike us initially as very plausible, rests on the conflation of two analytically distinct levels: the ontological and the methodological. This becomes clear as soon as we note that one major discourse theoretic consequence is that no strong methodological conclusions can be drawn from its negative ontology. It furnishes us only with a very weak methodological proposition, namely, that any methodological approach adopted must be compatible with its views on the nature of discourse. It is weak simply because of the very high degree of theoretical formalization involved in articulating such a theory of discourse. But its formalization permits a very wide range of methodological tools to choose from in conducting an analysis, including those associated with more traditional empirical approaches. And its simultaneous emphasis on the category of contingency translates into the equally weak methodological principle which suggests that meaningful analytical insights can only come from thoroughly detailed studies of concrete cases.

I will make two further preliminary methodological points. First, a discourse-theoretic approach overcomes the unfortunate idea which suggests that a theory is 'applied' to a case study. In other words, it puts into question the idea that a particular case is linked to a theoretical (universal) concept by the latter's ability to subsume the



former through the abstraction of positive properties. Instead, the relation between them is conceived, from a discourse-theoretic point of view, as one of *articulation*.<sup>19</sup> In a way, one could say that a case study's particular concrete contents come to hegemonize or disturb several of the formal-relational, and in this sense empty, theoretical terms, thereby yielding a new interpretation of the theory and the opportunity for further theoretical development. Second, it explodes the myth of being able to secure a standard set of methodological procedures (ie., idioms) which can be put to use whenever one is called upon to conduct a (political) analysis. As Laclau has suggested, the point is that "these are tools that the researcher can decide *ad hoc* to use in each case for pragmatic reasons... [T]hey are not unified in an established and orderly system of procedures called 'methodology'."<sup>20</sup>

This, then, opens wide the source field from which specific methodological tools can be drawn. It also puts the lie to the idea that the discourse-theoretic approach is simply one approach among others from which we can rationally pick one that best suits a particular purpose. Instead, the discourse-theoretic approach is perhaps more accurately described as a world-view. It is a particular world view that rearticulates all other approaches; and this on account of its ontology.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, with a negative ontology firmly in place, all idioms can become idioms of a discourse-theoretic ontology. The thesis I want to sustain here, in other words, implies that methodological tools derived from rational choice, structural-functionalism, institutionalism, statism, Marxism, policy-discourse approaches, corporatism, normative approaches, political culture approaches, behaviourism, feminism, and so on -- whether these emphasize statistical quantitative or qualitative procedures -- can all become articulated with discourse theory's negative ontology so long as their (ontological) presuppositions are revised accordingly. Likewise, the ontology presupposed by more traditional rational choice approaches have the potential to inflect the tools drawn from other approaches, including discourse theoretic approaches. In short, a discourse-theoretic ontology cannot, by definition, incorporate approaches that leave their (incompatible) ontological presuppositions unrevised. Each idiom, so long as it remains tethered to a specific ontology, sustains an approach that may rearticulate other methodological tool kits (and political phenomena), thereby bringing them all into its fold. This, for instance, is what makes possible Laclau and Mouffe's anti-essentialist re-reading of Marxist history.

Let me clarify this point a bit further. To show that one's theoretical *approach* (ie., the articulation of one's ontology with an idiom or set of idioms), whether explicitly acknowledged or not, makes a difference to how idioms are viewed and treated, let us exchange ontologies. Suppose, for instance, that we subscribe to an ontological realism of the Hobbesian sort. In this view, self-interested individuals, not discursive identities and dislocation, are taken as constitutive of the social world. This

means that, for example, rational choice idioms (such as game-theoretic mathematical tools, public choice methods, etc.), developed within this ontological framework, acquire a meaning and significance that is different from what would be the case had such tools been developed from within a negative ontological framework.

The rational choice approach, therefore, becomes the prism through which idioms themselves are inflected. Since its idioms are inescapably 'ontologized,' the rational choice *approach* becomes the ultimate background matrix against which explanations are judged adequate or satisfactory. If its ontology is of the Hobbesian sort, it is individualism that will provide its criterion of explanatory legitimacy. The point is that an ontology is always presupposed by an approach and cannot therefore be 'chosen' in any ordinary sense of the word; or if we wish to maintain the category of choice, ontological individualism is best described as a 'forced' choice. Within the parameters of this rational choice approach, to explain a political event means, ultimately, to always refer the idiomatically illuminated facts back to its ontological individualism (ie., in terms of given individuated ends and the coordinated efficiency with which such ends are pursued) -- an articulatory exercise that can, though need not be, made explicit. And the same goes for an ontological realism of the structural-systemic sort; or of the negative ontological sort.

But this means that idioms developed within a rational choice approach can be articulated to alternative ontologies, such as the discourse-theoretic ontology of lack. What must be kept in mind, however, is that methodological notions like the maximization of expected utility, for example, acquire very different meanings within the latter world view. Instead of interpreting the maximization of expected utility through a conception of human nature that emphasizes self-interested behaviour, it seeks to link it to a process of identity construction and social dislocation. Within this perspective, the idea of individualistic competitiveness does not vanish. Instead, it is conceived differently (ie., non-individualistically: each subject's aims are structured in relation to other subjects' aims); and it becomes one of several different ethical modalities of action (in Lacanian terms, an ethics of the imaginary order of rivalry, as opposed to an ethics of the symbolic or real orders).<sup>22</sup> Moreover, within this identity-based frame of reference, the subjects' perspective becomes explicitly constitutive of such explanations. The relevance of the subjects' perspective cannot, in other words, be minimized by treating their actions in an 'as if' mode. Even if we assume widespread predictive success, this cannot of itself justify an attitude of agnosticism regarding whether they 'actually' think this way or another. The ethical implications of such a stance would be highly dubious, to say the least. The point is that, from a discourse-theoretic point of view of the Laclauian-Lacanian sort, an ontological (and ethical) stance is always-already presupposed by an approach.



In summary, we could say that discourse-theoretical efforts are informed by the fundamental insight that discourse is constitutive of, and thus internal to, human practices and that any adequate understanding of political phenomena must take it into account. It holds fast to a strong thesis which claims that any political explanation that omits to take discourse's constitutive nature misses an opportunity to capitalize upon an important contribution that today's philosophical resources make possible. An explanation aspiring to shed light upon political phenomena that does not self-reflectively address itself to discourse's constitutive role is incomplete, in the best-case scenario, and simply erroneous in the worst-case scenario. Again to dispel a potentially fatal misunderstanding: discourse theory is not at all suggesting the abandonment of so-called empirical approaches. After all, it cannot escape engaging with the empirical world. Nor does it want to. Instead, it is urging the abandonment of certain outdated ontological presuppositions that still inform mainstream social sciences, without ignoring the considerable use-value attaching to its many methodological insights.

But what, it may be asked, is the basis of such claims? Here we are immediately led to consider the epistemological (for lack of a better word) assumptions underlying the discourse theoretic approach. What are these? They are certainly not of a rationalist mould, in which true knowledge is validated only against the background of intellectually intuited reason and logic. Instead, they are more in line with the empiricist's view that validation comes from the observation of phenomena. But it jettisons the empiricist's ontology to replace it with its own. The effect of this, as we saw earlier, is quite momentous. For once it is realized that observations are always-already discursively (and ontologically) conditioned, any suggestion that 'facts speak for themselves' is seriously discredited. It means that so-called 'facts' are themselves subject to debate. However, given this expansion of the field of evidence and debate, reasoned (or otherwise) argument proceeds as before. The wager of a discourse-theoretic approach that is psychoanalytically-informed is that it offers us, on all evidence, a theory well suited to analysing human practices in general, and political phenomena in particular. In doing so, it offers us, as a necessary by-product, a very powerful self-reflective account of its own relation both to other theoretical approaches and to concrete case studies.

### 'Ecology' as Master Signifier

Having put this psychoanalytically-informed discourse-theoretic approach into a broader context, I now want to focus on the notion of symbolic *identification* (or signification), as opposed to symbolic *identity*. And in order to make this distinction more palpable, to demonstrate how, in practice, the notion of symbolic identification

(with a master signifier) can enhance our understanding of politico-ideological hegemonic struggles, I will discuss the constitution of the environmental movement as a political phenomenon.<sup>23</sup> I should point out, however, that the illustrative analysis presented here can be readily generalized to all such social movements. Now, in approaching this topic, and for exegetical purposes, I have chosen to begin with several passages drawn from the work of Slavoj Žižek:

Ideological space is made of non-bound, non-tied elements, 'floating signifiers', whose very identity is 'open', overdetermined by their articulation in a chain with other elements -- that is, their 'literal' signification *depends on* their metaphorical surplus-signification. *Ecologism*, for example: its connection with other ideological elements is not determined in advance; one can be a state-orientated ecologist (if one believes that only the intervention of a strong state can save us from catastrophe), a socialist ecologist (if one locates the source of merciless exploitation of nature in the capitalist system), a conservative ecologist (if one preaches that man must again become deeply rooted in his native soil), and so on... "But this enchainment is possible only on condition that a certain signifier ... -- [the Lacanian Master Signifier or *point-de-capiton*] -- 'quilts' the whole field ..." "What is at stake in the ideological struggle is which of the 'nodal points, *points de capiton*, will totalize, include in its series of equivalences, these free-floating elements...."<sup>24</sup>

In today's ecological struggles, the position of the... abstract Universal is best epitomized by an external observer who apprehends 'ecology' as the neutral universality of a genus which then subdivides itself into a multitude of species (feminist ecology, socialist ecology, New Age ecology, conservative ecology, etc.); however, for a subject who is 'within', *engaged* in the ecological fight, there is no such neutral universality. For a feminist ecologist, say, the impending threat of ecological catastrophe *results from* the male attitude of domination and exploitation, so that she is not a feminist and an ecologist -- feminism provides her with the specific content of her ecological identity, that is, for her a 'non-feminist ecologist' is not another kind of ecologist, but simply somebody who *is not a true ecologist*.<sup>25</sup> The [proper question concerning the] Universal is therefore: how, under what concrete conditions, can the universal dimension... be posited 'as such', in explicit contrast to its particular qualifications, so that I experience the specific feminist (or conservative or socialist or...) qualification of my ecological attitude as something contingent with respect to the universal notion of ecology?<sup>26</sup>

.... [E]very attempt to define a substantial core of ecology, the minimal content with which every ecologist has to agree, is necessarily doomed to fail, since this very core shifts in the struggle for ideological hegemony. For a socialist, the ultimate cause of the ecological crisis is to be found in the profit-orientated capitalist mode of production, which is why anti-capitalism is for him the very core of a true ecological attitude; for a conservative, the ecological crisis is rooted in man's false pride and will to dominate the universe, so that humble respect for tradition forms the very core of a true ecological attitude; for a feminist, the ecological crisis results from male domination; and so forth. What is at stake in the ideologico-political struggle, of course, is the very positive content which will fill out the 'empty' signifier 'ecology': *what*



will it mean to be an 'ecologist' (or a 'democrat', or to belong to a 'nation'...)? And our point is that *the emergence of 'subject' is strictly correlative to the positing of this central signifier as 'empty'*: I become a 'subject' when the universal signifier to which I refer ('ecology', in our case) is no longer connected by an umbilical cord to some particular content, but is experienced as an empty space to be filled out by the particular (feminist, conservative, state, pro-market, socialist...) content.<sup>27</sup>

I will begin my commentary on the above extracts by way of a clarification -- a clarification without which we would risk conflating the status of the signifier as floating on the one hand, with the signifier as master on the other. Insofar as the signifier 'socialism', say, is not yet 'pinned' down, not yet incorporated into a participant's discursively-constituted experience, it is experienced as foreign, as floating. How does it become (partially) fixed? By bringing it into relation with a master signifier already existing within one's discursive economy, or through the introduction of a new master signifier into it. Hence, 'socialism' becomes fixed due to its relation to another (master) signifier, 'ecology', thereby yielding a "socialist ecologist (if one locates the source of merciless exploitation of nature in the capitalist system)." In other words, we need a minimum of two signifiers to generate the symbolic order. Alternatively, for a feminist ecologist, "the impending threat of ecological catastrophe results from the male attitude of domination and exploitation."

So far, then, we can make sense of Žižek's claim that what "is at stake in the ideologico-political struggle... is the very positive content which will fill out the 'empty' signifier 'ecology': *what will it mean to be an 'ecologist'.*" In short, this describes the transition from floating signifier to a partially fixed signifier with a determinate content. But this fixation, this attribution of meaning, has a precise condition of possibility. As Žižek puts it, "this enchainment is possible only on condition that a certain signifier... 'quilts' the whole field." In the case of the feminist ecologist, then, this master signifier is 'ecology'. The transition in the status of 'feminism' from floating to fixed results, then, as a by-product of the formation of a social (ecological) subject. We can employ the words of Ernesto Laclau to say that feminism succeeds in establishing itself as the concrete content of the master signifier 'ecology' when it "manages to appear to... other groups as the force capable of providing the best social arrangement possible."<sup>28</sup> The hegemonic struggle among competing imaginary-symbolic meanings (feminism, socialism, etc.) of terms like 'ecology' (... 'state', 'liberty', 'equality', etc.) acquires its consistency as a result of the participants *already having an established symbolic identification*, in this case with the signifier 'ecology'.

It is the *enigma* of 'ecology' (What does 'ecology' mean?) that unites the hegemonic field, not some shared positive content. In this sense, then, it is obvious

that each of the elements in the now-constituted set (feminism, socialism, anti-racism, etc.) must refer to this master signifier. In other words, above and beyond their particular meanings, each signifier in the set (feminism, socialism, etc.) also possesses *symbolic signification* (a reference to the enigmatic master signifier 'ecology') -- a symbolic signification which differs from 'ordinary' symbolic meaning or identity because it is ultimately self-referential and thus senseless. Each member of the set certainly possesses meaningful content by virtue of its differential relation with the others; but they must pay the price of *subjective* sense by referring to a master signifier *qua* senseless, *qua* condition of their possibility. Nevertheless, when the struggle is artificially brought to a close (through a vote, through decree, etc.), there is the possibility of regarding 'ecology' as the name given to what is really, say, an underlying radical feminist essence. In this view, the core of the true ecological attitude is to pin environmental degradation onto male domination. Each ordinary, partially-fixed signifier relates to the others by virtue of a metaphoric surplus marked by the master signifier of symbolic identification. What must be kept distinct, therefore, is the difference between the contents of 'ordinary' signifiers and the 'content' of the master signifier. While the first refers to symbolic-differential value accompanied by an imaginary signified, the latter refers to a purely imaginary entity without a symbolic place; which is why it finds its ultimate support in fantasies kept from public view.

We are now in a position to consider what is involved in the 'emergence' of the *subject* and its correlative master signifier. Of course, to be a feminist ecologist already implies subjective involvement. But this need not be acknowledged. Thus, the notion of the 'emergence of the subject/master signifier' coincides with the 'becoming-conscious' of one's subjective participation, an event which is not gradual (though much time and effort is usually involved in preparing the groundwork, in the 'weaving the spirit', so to speak) but abrupt. The emergence of the subject is experienced as a senseless contingency. Here, I am not speaking about the contingent relation between signifier and symbolic value; nor between signifier and signified; rather, I am referring to the contingent link between a set of signifiers and the signifier that ultimately constitutes it *as a set*. Indeed, it is a theoretical possibility that the imaginary-symbolic content of a particular signifier like 'feminism' should remain the same, while its symbolic signification changes abruptly. For example, we can imagine the concrete meaning we ascribe to feminism no longer being seen as essentially linked to the notion of ecology but, instead, as giving the essential ingredients to what it means to be a socialist. In short, we have a substitution of one master signifier ('socialism') for another ('ecology') yielding a metaphoric-subjective effect.

And how does this metaphoric substitution manifest itself? Through, what Laclau calls, the subversion of signification. Suddenly, 'ecology' is not what it always was. Suddenly things make no (or different) subjective sense. And this can be



experienced in a variety of different ways despite the unique description given from a theoretical perspective. For instance, we may confront 'ecology' with an 'aha' exclamation: what once made no determinate sense (on account of its floating character) has now become meaningful (ecology means *feminist* ecology). Or, the installation, through metaphoric hegemonization, of 'ecology' as *socialist* ecology may be taken as an experience of error ('all these years I had been deceiving myself by thinking of ecology as essentially feminist, I had been labouring under false-consciousness'). Alternatively, one may simply experience one's feminist ecology as purely contingent. In other words, one suddenly realizes that 'it could very easily have been otherwise'. However, this does not necessarily entail the automatic adoption of a new master signifier. Instead, it ushers in a new *modality* with which one experiences one's *symbolic identification* and one's political engagement, a modality in which responsible action takes on a central role.

### Conclusion

What this last paragraph indirectly highlights is how crucial it is, from the psychoanalytic perspective, to take into account the dimension of subjective experience -- more specifically, to take into account the distinction between symbolic identity and symbolic identification. This is because the subject is implicated at a more fundamental level when his or her symbolic identification is put into question (as compared to his or her symbolic identity and/or imaginary identity). Why is this? It is because symbolic identification is with the master signifier; and a master signifier organizes a set of 'ordinary' signifiers responsible for a whole series of imaginary-symbolic identities. In this view then, the discourse analyst analyses a social subject 'from within,' so to speak. Although the discourse a social subject relates to is 'objective', although signifiers can be identified and shared by others and by the political theorist, this should not serve as an excuse for eliding the specificity of each social subject's relation to that discourse: through symbolic identification, for example.<sup>29</sup>

Let me briefly conclude. In this paper I have described some of the main features of a psychoanalytically-informed discourse theory, including the potential fruitfulness of maintaining a distinction between symbolic identification on the one hand and symbolic identity on the other. In addition, I have argued that such a discourse-theoretic approach presents an insightful perspective not only regarding the analysis of political phenomena such as the mobilization and nature of ecological movements but also regarding its own relationship with other approaches to political analysis.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank Aletta Norval for providing me with many useful critical comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

<sup>2</sup>Saussure, Ferdinand de, *Course in General Linguistics* (London: Fontana, 1974).

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Hjelmslev, Louis, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, Francis J. Whitfield, trans. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965[1943]).

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Barthes, Roland, *Elements of Semiology*, Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, trans. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967).

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Levi-Strauss, Claude, 'Structural Analysis in Linguistics and in Anthropology' in Culler, Jonathan, ed., *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) 110.

<sup>6</sup>On this point, I refer the reader to the debate between Laclau & Mouffe and Norman Geras. See, for example, Geras, Norman, 'Post-Marxism?' (1987) 163 *New Left Review* 40; and Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe, 'Post-Marxism Without Apologies' (1987) 166 *New Left Review* 79.

<sup>7</sup>Here, we can see the relevance of Ernesto Laclau's review of Foucault's distinction between discursive practices (coming within the purview of archaeological studies) and extra-discursive practices (of primary concern to genealogical studies). To Laclau's mind, from a discourse-analytic perspective, both types of practices are properly discursive. In this view, Foucault's extra-discursive practices simply point to discourses which are more thoroughly 'sedimented', whose 'factual' signification is less readily put into question. See Laclau, Ernesto, 'Discourse' in Goodin, Robert A., and Philip Pettit, eds., *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993) 431.

<sup>8</sup>Here we refer the reader to Laclau's very clear presentation of this logic in 'Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics' in his *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1997).

<sup>9</sup>Indeed, it is this irreducible openness that points us toward the proper dimension of Derridean *supplementarity*.

<sup>10</sup>See also Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe: 'Post-Marxism Without Apologies' (1987) 166 *New Left Review* 79 at 86.

<sup>11</sup>See Laclau, Ernesto, 'Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?' in his *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1997).

<sup>12</sup>For a detailed account of these concepts, see Laclau, Ernesto, 'New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time' in his *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990) at 3.

<sup>13</sup>The other face, which I will not be dwelling on in this paper, is the *real* face. While the symbolic face of the subject is linked to a negative ontology, to the signifier and lack, to the subject of desire, etc.; the real face of the subject is linked to a positive ontology, to *jouissance*, to the subject of the drive, etc; and the two faces are mediated by fantasy.

<sup>14</sup>'Idiom' is a term I adopt on the basis of Albert Weale's discussion of it in his *The New Politics of Pollution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992). There he distinguishes the notion of idiom from Kuhn's paradigm on the one hand, and from Allison's model on the other. The idiom lacks the extensive institutionalization of the former throughout political practice; it is also often not as clearly developed and elaborated as the latter. In this sense, then, idioms could be said to describe a set of methodological tools, a set of sedimented practices of illuminating, and thinking about, political processes. Which idiom or idioms one adopts to shed light on a particular political event or set of phenomena cannot be tidily determined in advance. They cannot be definitively deduced from one's ontological stance, though the latter may exert fairly powerful articulating and channeling effects by virtue of the historically sedimented idea-complexes that accompany it.

<sup>15</sup>For an account of the logics of equivalence and difference, see Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985) at 127.

<sup>16</sup>Though the master signifier shares some important theoretical affinities with Ernesto Laclau's concept of the empty signifier, it is important to note that they are not articulated in the same way. As we will see further on, the Lacanian notion of master signifier is articulated in a way which permits a very strong distinction to be made between identity and identification. This, of course, is not to say that Laclau's empty signifier cannot also be articulated in this fashion. It simply means that Laclau has not emphasized this particular interpretation of it.

<sup>17</sup>To say, however, that a hegemonizing signifier only dreams an impossible dream, though indexing its precarious and tentative character, should not lead us to forget the extreme measures and violent exactions that often accompany its institution and maintenance.

<sup>18</sup>Fink, Bruce, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) at 93-4.

<sup>19</sup>On the concept of articulation, see Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985) at 105.

<sup>20</sup>Internal Memo, IDA PhD Programme, June 18, 1991.

<sup>21</sup>Though shifts in 'being' are perfectly possible (this, after all, is what psychoanalysis is all about), it is nevertheless important to remind ourselves that an ontology is not something one rationally 'chooses'. Granted one may describe different ontologies. But our social ontology, ultimately, is something that is lived and experienced as such, *not* something that one can manipulate by means of a simple rational decision; it is burdened with the *weight* of being. In short, lived ontologies have *inertia*. This explains the difficulty raised by issues of ideological critique and intervention. Ethics, in other words, does not simply entail the choice of one norm over another; it involves a change in one's very being.

<sup>22</sup>For a fuller account of Lacan's stance on ethics, see Lacan, Jacques, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis (1959-60)*, Jacques-Alain Miller, ed., Dennis Porter, trans. (New York: Norton & Co., 1992).

<sup>23</sup>For a related discussion, see Stavrakakis, Yannis, 'Green Ideology: A Discursive Reading' (1997) 2(3) *Journal of Political Ideologies* 259.

<sup>24</sup>Zizek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) at 87-88.

<sup>25</sup>This also illustrates the vacuousness of the assertion, in the context of education policies for instance, that 'all points of view' can be covered in a *neutral* fashion. For a devout muslim, the very neutrality of a wide-ranging religion class functions as a violent intrusion into her belief system and daily practice.

<sup>26</sup>Zizek, Slavoj, *The Indivisible Remainder* (London: Verso, 1996) at 128.

<sup>27</sup>Zizek, Slavoj, *The Indivisible Remainder* (London: Verso, 1996) at 131. On the coincidence of the emergence of the master signifier and the subject, see also Zizek, Slavoj, *The Abyss of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997) at 53.

<sup>28</sup>Laclau, Ernesto, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*. London: Verso, 1990) at 81.

<sup>29</sup>This already hints at the fundamental importance of the category of fantasy from the perspective of political analysis. Indeed, this paper in effect prepares the ground for such further elaboration. In putting this paper into a broader *psychoanalytic* context, I could say that the analysis of fantasies comprises a second analytical step, supplementing a study that takes its bearings primarily from discursively articulated signifiers in general, and master signifiers in particular. (See, for example, Zizek, Slavoj, 'Fantasy as a Political Category: A Lacanian Approach' (1996) 1(2) *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 77.) This, therefore, would bring us to within a hair's breadth of crucial ethical considerations, involving issues of critique, issues of how to intervene given the already-mentioned *inertia of being* (see note 21); of how to encourage greater active political participation in today's predominantly cynical society; of what kinds of modalities of action are ethically congruent with a psychoanalytically-inspired ontology; etc. And it is perhaps worth pointing out, here, that this inertia of being is linked not only to identification with the master signifier (thereby fully assuming a negative ontology), but also, and perhaps more importantly, to what Lacan calls *jouissance*. This hints at a supplementary ontology which, though positive, subscribes to no ordinary positivity.



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