

Logics, Discourse Theory and Methods: Advances, Challenges and Ways Forward

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Abstract

Logics of Critical Explanation proposed a methodological approach that could render the insights of Poststructuralist Discourse Theory (PDT) and post-Marxist political theory more conducive to critical empirical research. It also offered a language with which to counter positivist tendencies to colonize the space of methods and research strategies, showing how PDT could facilitate both explanatory and critical endeavours. Since its publication in 2007, a number of studies have applied the logics framework to empirical cases, while critically engaging with its methodological and theoretical arguments. The main purpose of this article is to evaluate some of these developments, and to set out some future challenges faced by this research programme.

Key Words

logics; post-Marxist political theory; discourse theory; poststructuralist discourse analysis; methodology; fantasmatic logics; political logics; social logics, articulation; retrodiction

Introduction: Negotiating the Methodological Deficit

Published in 1985, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* marked a milestone in the development of post-Marxist political theory and Poststructuralist Discourse Theory (PDT). Writing in the heyday of Thatcherism, Laclau and Mouffe provided a language with which to make sense of the strategic failure of the Left to respond to an unholy mix of aggressive neoliberalism, authoritarian populism, and a moral conservatism tinged with regressive cultural and nationalist jingoism. Returning to debates around the establishment of the 2nd and 3rd Internationals, the rise of fascism, and the emergence and crisis of the welfare state in the post-war period, they presented a novel synthesis of philosophical insights associated with

the linguistic turn of the 20th century, including Derridean deconstruction, Foucauldian discourse analysis, and Lacanian psychoanalysis. They showed how the fusion of these currents into the political thinking of the Left was essential and urgent, not only to understand the Left's failure to come to grips with Thatcherism and the rise of neoliberalism, but also to make sense of the rise and character of new social movements and to appreciate how the project of a radical democracy was central to realizing a progressive social and economic future.

The incipient post-Marxist project was given further impetus by a series of normative, theoretical and strategic challenges and exchanges after the publication of *Hegemony and Social Strategy*. In particular, Slavoj Žižek's perceptive critique of the approach, which was built around the Lacanian ideas of enjoyment and fantasy, and a renewed interest in ideology critique, injected vital new ideas into the evolving problematic (e.g. Žižek 1989; 1990). The application of the emerging approach to a host of empirical and theoretical objects of investigation in various fields, alongside forays by Laclau and Mouffe into related domains, most notably liberalism, democratic theory and populism, provided further momentum to the Essex School of Discourse Analysis. Yet these developments continued to elicit significant criticisms and questions, generating intense debate and discussion (e.g. Butler et al. 2000; Critchley 1996; Critchley and Marchart 2004; Geras 1990; Mouzelis 1990; Tønder and Thomassen 2005).

One crucial challenge, mostly left unaddressed, concerned the question of methodology. As the number of PhD students and scholars associated with the Essex School grew, so did the demand to make its methodology and research strategies more explicit. The demand was not simply to know more about how to 'apply' post-Marxist political theory or how to 'operationalize' PDT in a non-positivist way, but also to clarify how the research programme related to competing approaches associated with, for example, positivism, hermeneutics or critical realism. Published in 2007, *Logics of Critical Explanation* (hereinafter *Logics*) set out to address these and other challenges. It did so by engaging with core debates in the philosophy of social science, though questions of method were never treated as separate from other challenges linked to issues of theory and critique. In articulating principles of method, *Logics* also found itself clarifying and supplementing both conceptual and critical aspects of post-Marxist theory and PDT. For example, it sought to clarify the character of – and the relationship between – the normative and ideological aspects of critique by identifying and better delimiting the role psychoanalysis can play in such an account.

Over a decade has elapsed since the publication of *Logics*, so it is worth asking what new challenges have emerged in the intervening period that may point to new ways forward. The aim of this paper is to address this question by taking stock of developments in PDT since the publication of *Logics*. We begin by sketching out the basic assumptions and concepts of the logics approach, explaining how it endeavoured to engage with the methodological deficit in PDT and post-Marxist political theory. We then focus on a series of further methodological questions and challenges that have emerged since its publication, setting out several pathways through which they may be addressed.

The Logics Approach

As already noted, the logics approach draws its energy and inspiration from PDT. Broadly speaking, PDT is an interpretative approach that studies the way that systems of articulatory practice – understood in terms of discourse and radical contingency – shape our identities, interests and understandings in the production and transformation of social relations. In this view, the discourse analyst seeks to better understand how discourses structure, maintain, and transform social practices, and *vice versa*. Moreover, we could say that PDT is typically located at a macro-level of analysis, focusing on social practices and regimes, and motivated by a critical explanatory drive that foregrounds questions of ontology.

Before sketching out the logics approach in more detail, it is important to recall that this approach was designed to position PDT within a wider set of debates in the philosophy of social science, and to consider how to conceptualize its relation to other traditions of thought, such as positivism, hermeneutics, critical realism, neo-positivism, and so on. There are various reasons for using the concept of ‘logics’ to develop the approach. First, it self-consciously adopts a term that appears often in the work of Laclau and Mouffe, for example: ‘logics of equivalence and difference’, ‘political logics’, and ‘social logics’. Secondly, in elevating the term ‘logics’ into a central category of PDT, it enables *Logics* to engage more directly in debates between poststructuralism and other traditions within social science. The category of ‘logics’ thus marks out a space for PDT, enabling ready contrasts to be made with categories corresponding to other traditions, such as causal laws (positivism), contextualised self-interpretations (hermeneutics), or mechanisms (critical realism). The language of logics, therefore, offers poststructuralist discourse theorists a way to engage systematically with debates in the philosophy of social science, addressing questions of explanation, understanding, causality, testing, case selection, reliability and validity, and so on. In so doing, it suggests precise ways in which one can engage with these questions and ideas, so crucial to research strategy and method, but in a way that is congruent with its basic ontological presuppositions.

Thus far the category of logics has been treated as a placeholder designating a distinctive unit of explanation associated with a poststructuralist tradition, at least as regards the study of social and political phenomena. Having carved out this space for logics, however, we can then ask how to fill in its content. *Logics* thus engages in an exercise of ‘middle-ranging theorization’ (Laclau 2004, 323), which endeavours to *redescribe* the ontical (or empirical) level in terms of the distinctions brought about by its distinctive ontology, generating a triad of logics – social, political, and fantasmatic – that can facilitate the ‘operationalization’ of its core assumptions and concepts in the conduct of critical empirical research. *Social* logics are understood to aid the process of *characterizing* practices in different contexts by capturing their rules and elucidating the properties of the objects presupposed by the practice. Such logics are thus multiple and highly contextual, and they aim to capture a wide range of features we commonly associate with economic, social, and cultural processes: a particular logic of competition or commodification, for example, or the dynamics of bureaucratization. *Political* logics, on the other hand, enable us to explain and

potentially criticize the emergence, formation, and maintenance of practices or regimes. Here the approach develops Laclau and Mouffe's focus on the logics of equivalence and difference to grasp the way in which political frontiers are constructed (or broken down) by rendering social demands and identities equivalent (or different). Finally, *fantasmatic* logics allow analysts to describe, explain and potentially criticize the way subjects are 'gripped' by discourses, focussing on the production of certain fantasmatic narratives or ideals which structure the ways subjects are attached to certain signifiers, and on the different types of 'enjoyment' subjects procure in identifying with discourses and the holding of particular beliefs.

Developments and Challenges

Over the years, empirical studies in the PDT tradition have employed a wide range of research strategies and methodological techniques, both qualitative and quantitative, to address multiple research objects. But this has given rise to a tension between those who suggest that this *de facto* pluralism is in keeping 'with the underlying ontological assumptions of discourse theory', where 'there is no single, prescriptive methodological approach for conducting discourse theoretical informed research' (Hawkins 2015, 145), and others who would like to see more 'heuristic guidelines... to articulate concepts and practices with one another in innovative ways' and 'to deal with the linguistic and textual data that provide the raw material for any investigation into discourse' (Zienkowski 2012, 509).

Tomas Marttila's book-length contribution, *Post-Foundational Discourse Analysis*, ups the ante with the claim that the 'methodological shortcomings of the logics approach' means that it 'cannot systematically interlink the discourse theoretical framework crucial for the logics approach with empirical research practices' (Marttila 2015, 123). In a detailed exploration, Marttila makes several allegations, beginning with the claim that the logics approach – and the concept of logics – somehow stands apart from discourse. In his words,

we have little reason to analyze social logics in place of discourses because discourse – the arguably single-most important term of Post-foundational Discourse Analysis – can also serve the purpose of rendering visibility to relatively coherent patterns of social practices. Moreover, and in comparison to social logics, discourse is phenomenally elaborate enough to allow for its empirical observation in various socio-historical contexts (Marttila 2015, 120).

Marttila then goes on to make a number of specific methodological criticisms, including the claims that 'even though social, political and fantasmatic logics are assigned the methodological function of abstract-concrete middle-range concepts, their insufficient phenomenal conceptualization makes it difficult for them to refer to any empirically observable social phenomenon'; that the logics approach 'superimposes theoretical concepts, such as those of social, political and fantasmatic logics, seemingly arbitrarily and effortlessly upon empirical material'; and that the logics approach is not able to address various questions about the practice of empirical analysis, such as: the elaboration of 'the analytical and methodical stages leading to the empirical observation of different logics'; the description of

the way we can ‘identify social practices that adhere to the same social logic’; an explanation of the way to determine the ‘spatial context of empirical research’; and the explication of ‘what methodical rules apply for the compilation of the empirical material, and so forth’ (Marttila 2015, 119-24).

Remling makes a similar point when she argues that the logics approach pays insufficient attention to the operationalization of ‘its abstract theoretical concepts for concrete textual analysis’, and that existing studies rarely show ‘how the logics were brought to bear on the empirical material, be it interview data, analysis of news media, or policy documents. Such accounts provide the reader with a limited understanding of the analytical processes that lead to the eventual identification of different logics in a discourse’ (Remling 2018, 2). Finally, Marttila makes a related charge that the logics approach is unable to develop ‘any analytical strategies for analyzing the *sociomaterial* level of discourse’, which resonates with others who argue that the logics approach and PDT more generally can and should be further developed by engaging more systematically with literature that takes ‘materialities’ seriously, such as science and technology studies and new materialism, without losing sight of the lessons learnt in the wake of the discursive turn (e.g. Carpentier 2017; Glynos 2012; West 2011).

Taken together, then, such interventions touch upon a range of pressing issues. These include: the relationship between discourse and logics; the materiality of discourse and logics, and the role language and the linguistic turn play in the understanding of social and political phenomena; the relations between the logics approach and adjacent perspectives and methods; the gathering and analysis of texts and other linguistic data, and the movement from data (e.g. interviews, documents, observations, and so on) to contextualised interpretations and then to social logics; and the relations between the different steps of the approach as a whole, including the different types of logic in the production and testing of critical explanations. We examine each of these themes in turn.

Discourse and Logics, Language and Materiality

At the outset, there is a suggestion in Marttila’s critique that discourse and logics are rival concepts or alternative paradigms, and that the logics approach forces researchers to choose between antithetical problematics. But discourse and logics are not separate in the logics approach. On the contrary, logics are introduced and explicitly formalised to better characterise, explain and criticise concrete discourses. Put more fully, in the logics approach – and following Laclau and Mouffe to the letter – discourses are defined as ‘articulatory practices’, while logics capture those processes that inform and structure such practices or regimes of practices (or ‘discursive’ or ‘hegemonic’ regimes). What is more, in stressing that discourse is an articulatory practice, the conception of discourse that is used in the logics approach also problematizes the need to ‘reconcile’ discourse and materiality. While it is certainly true that the logics approach does in fact open up some interesting points of contact with some strands of new materialism (West 2011, Glynos 2012), it is crucial not to lose sight of the PDT insight that discourse is also *itself* a material practice and outcome from the

outset. It is difficult to think of an articulatory practice – and all social practices are in some form or another articulatory – that is not material, and it is equally problematic to see the outcomes of such practices – incomplete discursive formations – as simply linguistic or purely symbolic entities.

Where, then, does language or the linguistic dimension of social and political life feature in the logics approach, and how can it be analysed? Or, as Zienkowski and Remling put it, how can the logics approach deal with the linguistic and textual data that typically provide the bulk of the raw material for an investigation into discourse? Here it is important to stress that while PDT and the logics approach partake of the linguistic turn, the PDT/logics complex is not a strictly linguistic approach to politics. Instead, as one of the titles of Laclau's books suggests (*The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*) the resources of linguistic theory and rhetoric are used to rework the assumptions and concepts of social and political theory, especially in the Marxist tradition. For example, Derrida's deconstruction of the Saussurean model, or Lacan's return to Freud, armed with the language of signifiers and contingency to rethink the unconscious, provide the wherewithal to problematise 'the systematicity of the system' in the structuralist problematic – the fullness and closure of symbolic orders – and thus to reconceptualise questions of power, subjectivity and agency (cf. Howarth 2013). Understood in this way, then, the logics approach can be understood to use the resources of linguistic philosophy and rhetoric to problematise and elucidate a wide range of puzzling phenomena. For example, Griggs and Howarth's account of the politics of 'sustainable aviation' in the UK focusses in part on the role of naming and rhetorical redescription to explain the campaigns that have successfully challenged the plans and policies of successive UK governments to expand airport capacity, especially in the South-East of England (Griggs and Howarth 2013).

Articulating Adjacent Idioms

The application of the logics approach can of course be supplemented and enriched by drawing upon insights from perspectives other than the tradition of linguistic philosophy and rhetoric, including Critical Discourse Analysis, discourse pragmatics, Foucauldian discourse analysis, and others. For example, in applying the logics approach to investigate discursive patterns underlying the critiques of trade unions in the media, ideas like polyphony, meta-discourse, and meta-politics have been deployed to both assist in generating a logics-based research strategy for generating data and as a way of making sense of this data (Zienkowski 2018; Zienkowksi and De Cleen 2020). In a similar vein, Elise Remling's (2018) critical analysis of EU climate policy isolates a challenge in pairing the use of logics with in-depth data analysis, specifically as regards the identification or 'coding' of the social and political logics across distinct data sources. In response to this challenge, Remling proposes the incorporation of tools from critical discourse analysis – what she calls assumptions and genre chains. In this view, the difficult task of spotting 'more implicit *moments of contestation* and exclusionary aspects' in any one text is addressed by proposing a 'genre chain' of texts, that facilitates a 'diachronic comparative analysis which teases out the more implicit

marginalizing political logics behind the policies' (Remling 2018, 10), thus making the 'analytical process more rigorous and transparent' (Remling 2018, 14).

Such operations and reflections about method are intimately connected with the practice of articulation, which is a core methodological element in *Logics*. In particular, the fourfold processes of 'reactivation, deconstruction, commensuration and articulation' can bring about methodological and theoretical innovation, while avoiding the problems of subsumption or eclecticism, thus enabling researchers using the logics approach to forge links between different traditions (Howarth 2005, 326-328; see also Glynnos and Howarth 2007, 165-208; Glynnos 2014, 5). This practice is evident, for example, in Griggs and Howarth's articulation of Foucault's concept of the statement within the logics approach in their analysis of aviation policy in the UK and the ongoing political struggles to fix its meaning and effects (Griggs and Howarth 2019). They draw on Foucault's archaeological approach to describe and map statements of various types, as they appear, disappear, circulate and evolve in the changing policy discourses of UK aviation in different contexts. Identifying and tracing core statements through the manual processing of an exhaustive archive of relevant policy documents and texts on the topic provides vital clues with which to delimit competing discursive formations, as well as allowing for the detection and explication of the underlying rules and conditions that brought them into being.

Yet, in order to avoid the twin dangers of eclecticism and subsumption, it was necessary for Griggs and Howarth to *reactivate* the problems that Foucault addressed in developing his archaeological approach, namely, the critique of the traditional history of ideas, and with it the privileged role of the human subject in the constitution of discourses, and to explicate Foucault's desire to elaborate a pure description of discursive events by excavating the rules that enabled their production and acceptance in an autonomous domain of discourse. At the same time, from a PDT perspective, it was also necessary to *deconstruct* Foucault's commitment to a separation between discursive and non-discursive practices, and to question his radical endeavour to split questions of description, on the one hand, from meaning and evaluation on the other. It was only after this deconstructive operation had been undertaken that the resources of statement analysis could be rendered *commensurate* with the ontological assumptions of PDT, and then *integrated* into the logics framework. This fourfold operation thus made it possible for Foucault's concepts of the statement, discursive formation, and so on, to take their places in the arsenal of tools at the disposal of the logics researcher.

The 'Application Problem' Revisited: Judgement, Retrodiction and Paradigms

Yet this still begs the question of *how* to apply and operationalise the logics approach in empirical research and discourse analysis from a PDT point of view. Here a key issue is the gathering and analysis of empirical data (in the form of documents, interviews, observations, images, focus groups, media representations, experiments, and so on), alongside the production of 'contextualised self-interpretations' and the identification of logics – social logics, for example. We should begin by recalling that social logics serve to *characterise*

practices and regimes by capturing the latter's rules, objects and conditions, and they are discerned in a to-and-fro movement between an assemblage of texts, documents, observations, actions and events, and the ongoing endeavours to render a practice or a regime of practices more intelligible. In other words, social logics are not found, deduced or extrapolated directly from documents, texts, media representations, and so forth, but are constructed, tested and reworked by the analyst in relation to a diverse range of empirical data, where the latter are related to the core puzzles and questions investigated.

Equally, it should be stressed that there are no algorithmic rules or procedures that enable a researcher to move seamlessly from data to interpretations to social logics. We thus need to avoid the temptations of fetishizing questions of method by deconstructing the false opposition between an anarchistic approach, where 'anything goes', and a subsumptive principle of operationalisation in which we can smoothly and mechanically translate data into self-interpretations and logics. More positively, this means that the application of the logics approach is more akin to the *art* of the historian, literary critic or psychoanalyst than the spurious scientific pretensions of much positivist social science.

Of course, as Derrida notes about deconstruction, there are some general guidelines that can provide a 'certain marching order' to our research practices (Derrida 1981, 271). We need to spell out certain principles of research design, issues of case selection, guidelines to select, collect and analyse data, the testing of putative explanations, and so on. And here it is important to re-stress the role that *judgement* plays in the application process (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 183-91). A core element of the logics approach is that a researcher uses their situated ability, acquired through practice, to connect key theoretical concepts – such as the social, political, and fantasmatic logics, or hegemony – to the empirical phenomena that are studied via the appropriate production and selection of relevant data. While the construction of logics always respects the meanings of actors, they do not just transmit or refract their self-interpretations. In other words, in seeking to disclose the underlying rules and objects that inform and contextualise self-interpretations, social logics may not overlap with a subject's self-understandings as expressed in interviews, speeches, or texts. The onus is on the researcher to articulate them as a means of conceptualizing the elements that bring into view the core features of a practice or regime of practices. Logics are thus arrived at through iterative, *reductive* cycles of problematizing phenomena, articulating explanatory logics-based hypotheses, and evaluating these hypotheses in dialogue with other researchers and/or practitioners (Glynos and Howarth 2019).

At the same time, while the roles of judgement, articulation and reproduction in the research process sustains – and ought to sustain – a necessary and welcome degree of flexibility and pluralism in tackling the application problem, there are also *paradigms* and exemplary studies that serve as useful 'heuristic guidelines', especially to organize the process of constructing logics out of the data. For example, Glynos et al. have suggested that the process of using the logics approach to shed light on the service sector policy reform process can be facilitated by breaking down the service chain into four 'nodes': provision; distribution; delivery; and governance (Glynos and Speed 2012; Glynos, Klimecki, and Willmott 2012; Glynos, Speed, and West 2015; Glynos, Klimecki, and Willmott 2015). If the

node of *provision* is about how services ‘appear on the scene’, the node of *distribution* is about the conditions under which services can be accessed by users; and while the node of *delivery* is concerned with how services are delivered, placing the spotlight on the norms governing the relationship between professionals and users, the node of *governance* is about how the norms characterizing other node-specific practices are instituted, evaluated, maintained, or transformed. The benefit of such a nodal framework, they claim, is that it allows discourse analysts interested in researching service-based policy reform processes to see more clearly how social logics are distributed across the nodes. Among other things, this enables analysts to specify with greater precision the relevant locus of norms in relation to which *political* and *fantasmatic* logics are articulated. The nodal framework therefore offers some valuable heuristic guidance, making tractable the process of analysing the corpus of policy texts, as well as relating them to the three logics, conceived of as explanatory units.

Research Techniques in Gathering and Analysing Data

In many ways, the above interventions represent the tip of the iceberg, as scholars seek to apply the logics approach to puzzles in various fields. Indeed, just as a range of adjacent research traditions and perspectives can be incorporated into PDT through the logics approach, so too can various concrete research techniques and strategies. So long as these are actively rendered commensurate with PDT presuppositions, a potentially vast range of diverse techniques can be employed to address research puzzles. In the final section, then, we briefly illustrate the way this aspect has been fleshed out in empirical research, focussing on two techniques in particular: topic modelling and Q methodology.

Topic Modelling

One quantitative-cum-qualitative research technique that has been integrated into the logics approach is ‘topic modelling’. In his empirical research on the different political strategies that shape the debates on international trade policy in the European Parliament, Thomas Jacobs uses this method (with the help of the MALLET software package) to discern the articulations that form a regular discursive pattern in a large corpus of policy texts and documents. This method of analysis begins by using an algorithm to delineate which words and phrases are present or absent in the same texts, and it then employs this knowledge to group together signifiers that form such patterns within a ‘topic’ (Jacobs and Tschötschel 2019, 477). After carefully integrating this method within the PDT and logics framework, Jacobs equates ‘topics’ with discursive patterns of articulation that take various forms and modalities. He argues that the content of a topic constitutes an articulatory pattern, which can then be interpreted by the analyst as a political strategy. ‘Topics’ are thus understood to contain ‘discourses’ or ‘discursive articulations’ that can be understood and analysed as ‘political strategies’ (Jacobs and Tschötschel 2019).

Importantly, the move from a particular articulation in a text to a discursive pattern that is interpreted as a political strategy is a qualitative operation. So, if an individual

articulation is the product of a ‘self-interpretation’, which is enunciated by a subject who writes, speaks or acts, then the analysis and interpretation of a discursive pattern is the product of a ‘second-order interpretation’ by the researcher (Marttila 2015, 100-104). To emphasize this qualitative jump, Jacobs notes that once he has made the move from an individual articulation to a discursive pattern of articulation, and from first-order to second-order hermeneutics, he no longer speaks of ‘discourses’ but of ‘logics’. One example of this type of analysis is evident in Jacobs’ exploration of the way that social actors perceive and construct their own sense of political agency. Using his corpus-linguistic methodology to operationalize PDT and the logics approach, he examines the discursive construction of political agency in the EU Parliament’s plenary debates on international trade, finding a consensus in that assembly that elected politicians can and do have a non-trivial role to play in the governance and regulation of international markets. His conclusion is partly founded on the claim that the prevalence of words like ‘support’, ‘provide’, ‘able’, ‘believe’, ‘guarantee’, ‘conditions’, and ‘enable’ in the corpus of documents analysed all refer to and presuppose the possibility for political action and intervention, whereas words like ‘need’, ‘essential’, ‘necessary’, ‘must’, ‘ensure’, and ‘needs’ all imply and call for the necessity that something should be done. In short, the analysis enables Jacobs to claim that the loading on this particular topic expresses a social logic of political action that advocates the necessity or at least possibility for intervention in markets, thus cutting across the grain of existing interpretations (Jacobs 2020).

Q Methodology

A further quantitative-cum-qualitative research technique that has been used in deploying the logics approach is Q methodology (Griggs et al. 2017). Combining Q methodology with other research techniques (such as interviews and documentary analysis) in a study of Bristol and Grenoble, Griggs et al. explored the grip of the ‘sustainable city’ as a signifier or social imaginary, and its articulation in different discourses across the two cities. Broadly speaking, Q-methodology invites a selected group of subjects to sort a set of statements (the ‘Q sample’), which represent the range of debate on a chosen issue (the ‘concourse’) into a distribution of preferences (the ‘Q sort’). The Q sorts are designed to reveal the subjective meanings that participants accord specific statements, so that statistically significant factors can be inferred to identify collective viewpoints. On the one hand, it is intended to exhibit the broad parameters of a contested issue or public debate and how it is structured (Skelcher, Sullivan and Jeffares 2013, 99), assuming there are a limited number of viewpoints on a specific issue. On the other hand, as a methodological process, it relies heavily on the situated judgements and interpretations of researchers and their related theoretical points of view, especially as they interact with subjects in the collection of data. Indeed, problem-definition, the mapping of the concourse, and the identification and naming of different viewpoints, are constitutive moments in forming objects of research. When practiced with other methods within the PDT framework, such exercises can be used to excavate and assess how local actors construct, live out, and are gripped by different signifiers and discourses.

In their study of Bristol and Grenoble, for example, Griggs et al. first identified and analysed the terrain of public argumentation around the ‘sustainable city’ by setting out the different framings of this idea in various transnational networks and arenas, including technocratic versions of ecological modernisation, as well as radical articulations of local transitions and self-sufficiency. Seeking to assess the character and hold of these visions in the two cities, they then show that there was no consistent investment in mainstream conceptions of sustainable urban development, and no significant support either for entrepreneurial or radical green localist discourses. Instead, they identified a common indifference to the tenets of ecological modernization and entrepreneurialism, and a shared scepticism about local self-sufficiency. More fully, Q methodology enabled them to discern three distinctive discourses of the sustainable city – named ‘progressive reformism’, ‘public localism’, and ‘moral stewardship’ respectively – amongst the key local actors engaged in urban development. But, critically, their examination of the form and logic of these discourses showed that they offered uncertain foundations upon which to construct new visions of the ‘sustainable city’, largely because of the transformation of the ‘sustainable city’ from a relatively fixed idea into a contestable floating signifier, and because of the difficulty of grafting the new narratives onto the prevailing logics and practices of local practitioners, where the latter tended to act as policy *bricoleurs* who connected diverse elements in the search for practical solutions. In criticizing and evaluating these discourses, Griggs et al. thus conclude that efforts to develop and implement new visions of ‘sustainable cities’ are better served by fostering an agonistic ethos of ‘pragmatic adversarialism’ amongst rival strategic leaders and stakeholders, thus foregrounding the logics of politics and the right to difference (Griggs et al. 2017).

Conclusion

This article has set out the main assumptions and core concepts of the logics approach, situating them within the wider framework of PDT. Our focus has been on the methodological deficit in PDT, which the logics approach originally endeavoured to address, where the problem of methodology encompasses questions of characterisation, explanation, and critique, as well as more concrete issues concerning research strategies and techniques, which have to be elaborated to construct and address particular puzzles. In responding to the different challenges and rich interpretations of the logics approach, many of which arise from its use in concrete empirical research, we have endeavoured to show that it is best viewed as an open-textured space, where various contingent elements, including puzzles and research questions, come into play and can be articulated together. We do not therefore provide a recipe or blueprint with which to operationalise the concepts of PDT in a mechanical fashion, suggesting instead that the way forward is to continue to stress the inter-related and overdetermined elements of the approach – problematization, retrodiction, logics, articulation, and critique – which are in turn connected through a dynamic ‘reductive cycle’, whose successive iterations spark a spiral of knowledge production, critical engagement, and political intervention.

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