Philosophical roots of discourse theory

By Ernesto Laclau

1.   Discourse theory, as conceived in the political analysis of the approach linked to the notion of hegemony – whose initial formulation is to be found in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* – has its roots in the three main philosophical developments with which the XXth Century started. In the three cases there is an initial illusion of immediacy, of a direct access to the things as they are in themselves. These three illusions were the referent, the phenomenon and the sign, which are at the root of the constitution of three currents of thought: analytical philosophy, phenomenology and structuralism, respectively. Now, at some point this initial illusion of immediacy dissolves in the three currents – from this point of view their history is remarkably parallel – and they have to open the way to one or other form of discourse theory. This means that discursive mediations cease to be merely derivative and become constitutive. This is what happens in analytical philosophy in the work of the later Wittgenstein, to phenomenology in the existential analytic of Heidegger, and the structuralism in the post-structuralist critique of the sign (Barthes, Derrida, Lacan).

These three currents have been important in shaping the philosophical foundations of the theory of hegemony, but it is the latter – the post-structuralist one – which has been the most important, and we will refer to it in what follows.

2.   We can differentiate three moments in the structuralist tradition in the XXth Century. The first is to be found in the work of the founder of structural linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, and it was articulated around three basic distinctions and two fundamental principles. The three distinctions were those of 1) langue (the treasure of language deposited in the mind of the speaker) and parole (the individual instances of the use of language); 2) signifier (stream of sounds) and signified (concept) which together constitute the sign, which is the fundamental unit of linguistic analysis; 3) sintagma (relations of combination between the signs) and paradigm (relations of substitution). The two principles were that in language there are no positive terms but only differences (each term signifies what it does only through its differences with other terms), and that language is only form and not substance (each term relates with other terms only through the rules of combination and substitution linking them, independently of their material contents).

This approach, in spite of its coherence and novelty, had two central flaws. The first, that, for Saussure, a linguistic of discourse – conceived by him as any linguistic unity longer than the sentence – was impossible given that the concatenation of sentences depended on the whims of the speaker and could not be submitted to any structural regularity. With this, the possibility of moving from the linguistic level stricto sensu to a more generalised semiology (science of signs in society), which was also part of the Saussurean project, was severely limited. The second and most serious flaw was that 1) there is a strict isomorphism between signifier and signified (which means that one and only one concept corresponds to each stream of sounds); 2) there is, however, the strict principle that language is form and not substance – which means that the

purely substantial difference between sound and concept has to be ignored. As, on the other hand, from the point of view of form there is only isomorphism, the signifier and the signified become undistinguishable and the notion of the sign – the cornerstone of structuralism – collapses.

It was in a second moment, in the radicalisation of the structural formalism by the Prague and Copenhagen schools, that these initial difficulties were overcome. According to Hjelmslev, for instance, the solution consists in isolating smaller units than the word. Sounds composing a word can be subdivided into individual sounds (phonems) and the same happens with the order of the signified (glossems), and it is clear that there is no isomorphism between these smaller units. (The word 'cow', for instance, can be subdivided into three sounds – C-O-W – and into a series of conceptual components – animal, female, grown up, etc – and it is clear that there is no one to one correlation between units of the two levels). In that sense, a purely formal description of language becomes possible.

This linguistic formalism, by breaking the link between linguistic categories and the substance that we call speech, made possible the extension of structural analysis to the ensemble of social life and opened the way to a generalised semiology, as the one practised by Barthes and others since the 1960s.

One third moment is, however, to be taken into account to understand the kind of discourse theory which is going to be decisive in the shaping of the theory of hegemony: this is the transition to what, in very general terms, can be considered as post-structuralism. The general trend of the

latter has been to put into question the notion of closed totality which underlies the approaches linked to classical structuralism. To mention some of the most important currents within this trend, we can refer to Barthes' criticism of the strict separation between connotation and denotation, as it takes place in his later work, especially in S/Z, Derrida's notion of écriture and the critique of the logic of supplementarity accompanying it, and Lacan's logic of the signifier, which radically questions the relation between signifier and signified and conceives the bar separating them not only as a link making possible signification but as an obstacle to it. In all three cases what we are confronted with are the internal aporias that structural organisations show and the impossibility of overcoming them within the system of rules presiding over their constitution.

3.   It is within the latter framework that we can understand the emergence of the theory of hegemony, which is the central piece of the discourse analytical approach to politics. Its main theoretical steps are the following:

a)   if identities in any signifying space are purely differential, the totality of the system of differences is involved in any single act of signification. This requires that the system – the totality which grounds the differences – is a closed one, otherwise we would have an infinite dispersion within which no signification would be possible;

b)   the totality, however, requires limits, and the limits are only visible if we can see what is beyond them. That beyond, however, can only

be one more difference and, as the system is the system of all differences, that would not be a true 'beyond': it would be undecidable between internality and externality;

c)   the only way out of this dilemma is if the 'beyond' has the character of an exclusion: not one more element but one in an antagonistic relation to an 'inside' which is only constituted through the latter. In political terms, an enemy which makes possible the unity of all the forces opposed to it;

d)   this, however, creates a new problem, for vis-à-vis the excluded elements all identities antagonised by it are not merely <u>differential</u> but also <u>equivalent</u>, and equivalence is precisely what subverts difference. So that which makes difference possible is also what makes it impossible.   In deconstructive terms; conditions of possibility are, at the same time, conditions of impossibility;

e)   we have here the limits of all structural arrangement: that which would make possible the structural unity is, at the same time, a necessary and, however, impossible object.   All identity is constituted around the unresolvable tension between difference and equivalence;

f)   as impossible, a direct representation of this totality is unreachable; as necessary, it will have to be, however, somehow present at the level of representation. It will necessarily be, however, a <u>distorted</u> representation, for it does not correspond to any possible object. The means of representation available are, however, only the particular differences, and the process of representation can only

consist in one of these differences being split between its differential character and a new role by which it assumes the representation of that impossible totality. This relation, by which a certain particularity, assumes the representation of a totality entirely incommensurable with it is what, in discourse theory, is called a hegemonic relation.

4.   The centrality of hegemonic relations in discourse theory comes from the fact that the desire for fullness is always present, but fullness, as such, is unachievable and can only exist circulating among particularities which assume temporarily the role of incarnating it. This explains why equivalence and difference, - which broadly speaking correspond to what we have called before combination and substitution in linguistic analysis – are the two main dimensions of political life. A populist discourse, for instance, which tends to dichotomically divide society into two antagonistic camps will tend to expand the equivalential chains, while institutionalist discourses, on the contrary, will privilege difference at the expense of equivalence.

This, finally, explains why for discourse theory social life can be described in terms of a generalised rhetoric: as no identity is closed in itself but is submitted to constant displacements in terms of chains of combinations and substitutions, they are constituted through essentially tropological processes which do not refer to any ultimate transcendental foundation.