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AN INTRODUCTION TO POWER, MULTIDIRECTIONALITY
AND CONTINGENCY
Political Struggles over Representation, Decision-Making and Technology

If we assume that society is not homogeneous but diverse, and if we assume that society does not deal with this diversity in a harmonious way, but in a conflictive way, then the notion of political struggle becomes a key concept to better our understanding of the social. The structural presence of societal diversity implies the existence of different positions, different demands, different identities and identifications, and different levels of access to all sorts of resources. Even if, in some cases, the struggles triggered by these differences can be democratically tamed, this does not nullify the existence of these differences – which sometimes turn into oppositions and contradictions – or the political confrontations that these differences then provoke. It is exactly the realm of the political (and not only politics) that deals with these differences, as Mouffe's definition of the political as “the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations”¹ demonstrates. Of course, the political can handle differences in a variety of ways, some of which are violent, and others are more peaceful; some are emancipatory, while others are authoritarian. If we take, for instance, Gramsci's² writing about the difference of military war and political struggle, we find violence resonate in both components:

Political struggle is enormously more complex [than military war]: in a certain sense it can be compared to colonial wars or to old wars of conquest when, that is, the victorious army occupies or intends to occupy permanently all or part of the conquered territory. In that case, the defeated army is disarmed and dispersed, but the struggle continues on the terrain of politics and of military “preparation”.

Class struggle is, of course, one of the most classic examples of political struggle, but just as there is a need to de-essentialize the notion of class, and to consider the articulation of a variety of identities (and subject positions) in the construction of subjectivity (and social formations), we also need to de-essentialize the concept of struggle, avoiding that class struggle becomes a privileged location of struggle, as was suggested by Marx and Engels when they famously wrote that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”³. Nevertheless, with its immense intellectual history, class struggle remains a key signifier in the literature on political struggle. And we do need to take the plural ('class struggles') in Marx and Engels's citation from the

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¹ C. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London: Verso, 2000, 101.

² A. Gramsci, *Antonio Gramsci: Prison Notebooks, Volume 1*, § 134 “Political Struggle and Military War”, New York: Colombia University Press, 1975, 218-219.

³ K. Marx, F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, [Auckland]: Floating Press, 2008, 6.

Communist Manifesto and their interest in, for instance, national struggles seriously, as Losurdo's⁴ political and philosophical history of class struggle argues.

The idea of the plural ('struggles') offers an important tool to further broaden the span of the notion of political struggle, as the realm of societal conflict driven by difference, which is also intimately connected with the notion of power, and how it is claimed, negotiated, contested, (re)appropriated... In particular, the Foucauldian power analytics allows us to move away from the idea of struggle as a process that is fully controlled by a particular actor, as he sees power "as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization" and "as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them"⁵. This is where the notion of multidirectionality – part of the title of this special issue – comes in, with Foucault arguing that power "comes from everywhere"⁶, and thus "from below"⁷. Not limited to a "binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled"⁸, "power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non egalitarian and mobile relations"⁹.

Multidirectionality also implies contingency – another part of the title of this special issue – as the multidirectional workings of power prevent the ultimate sedimentation or closure of the social, allowing for the political to intervene and unsettle fixations, even if political struggles are – simultaneously – aimed at creating or consolidating particular hegemonies. This struggle for hegemonic positions in the social realm, even if it concerns stabilizations of the social, also shows how contingent the nature of power is; power positions are relational, being existent *in relation to*, or *dependent upon* the interactions of actors, and networks of actors, in given socio-political and cultural contexts. Moreover, power strategies provoke counter-strategies, which renders resistance an inherent component of power relations. In practice, the existence of power relationships "depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance"¹⁰ and struggle¹¹. And this again strengthens contingency: the dominance of certain groups, who are engaged in particular struggles and who manage to fixate their discursive-material positions as hegemonic – at least temporarily – does not exclude other social groups from producing counter-hegemonic discourses with their own truth claims. Actually, it is the openness of the social¹² that allows for both the articulation of hegemonic discourses and the dominance of certain groups, and for the possibilities of re-articulation, contestation or subversion of these discourses, together with their radical re-articulation or replacement by other (hegemonic) discourses. As Foucault argues, "[p]ower's condition of possibility [...] is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable"¹³.

This special issue, focusing on different case studies and drawing from different examples, addresses these issues of political struggle, contextualized by multidirec-

⁴ D. Losurdo, *Class Struggle: A Political and Philosophical History*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

⁵ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, New York: Vintage Books, 1990, 92.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹¹ M. Foucault, "The Subject and Power", *Critical Inquiry*, 8, 4 (1982): 777-795.

¹² E. Laclau, C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London: Verso, 1985.

¹³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 93.

tionality and contingency. Using different starting and entry points (based, *inter alia*, on journalism studies, organizational communication, game studies, discourse theory, visual communication), the collection of articles included in this special issue sheds light on the logics of political struggle. In particular, this special issue allows reflecting on the distinction between struggles *over* and struggles *through*, very much in line with Plekhanov's distinction between the means and aims of political struggle, and his argumentation for the alignment of both in socialist strategy¹⁴. The articles in this special issue demonstrate that struggle can, on the one hand, be associated with conscious acts of re/appropriation or dominance *over* specific issues, discourses, positions (struggle over), but, on the other hand, also with the means, tactics, strategies *through* which struggles are waged (struggle through). Furthermore, the special issue also allows showing that there are different – albeit interconnected – fields over which political struggles are waged, and that there are different mechanisms through which political struggles are organized. We have identified, in the special issue articles, three main fields *over* which a struggle is waged: representation, decision-making and technology. In parallel, the articles also contain three mechanisms through which struggles are organized: (one-sided) narration, debate/dialogue and material construction (see Table 1). Of course, these fields and mechanisms are not exclusive, and others can be distinguished. Moreover, they are not isolated or disconnected from each other; in contrast, they are very much interconnected and often interdependent.

Table 1 - *Struggles over and through: Fields and Mechanisms*

	<i>Struggle over (Fields)</i>			
<i>Struggle through (Mechanisms)</i>		Representation	Decision-making	Technology
	(One-sided) Narration			
	Debate/ dialogue			
	Material construction			

In the following part of the introduction, we will elaborate a bit more on these six fields and mechanisms, starting from each of the three fields (struggled over) to then explain how each of the mechanisms is activated within these fields, also by referring to particular articles in this special issue. Starting with the field of *representation*, we need to point out first that, in this context, we are *not* referring to the exercise of delegated power (the political meaning of representation), but to the construction of social reality¹⁵, with its discursive and material manifestations and practices¹⁶ (the cultural meaning of representation). The struggle over how social reality is represented is indeed a crucial political process, as, for instance, argued by Hall, from a Cultural Studies perspective¹⁷.

¹⁴ G.V. Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works. Volume I: Socialism and the Political Struggle*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974, 70.

¹⁵ S. Hall, "The Work of Representation", in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, edited by S. Hall, London: Sage, 1997: 13-64.

¹⁶ See, for example, N. Carpentier, *The Discursive-Material Knot: Cyprus in Conflict and Community Media Participation*, New York: Peter Lang, 2017.

¹⁷ S. Hall, "Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-structuralist Debates", *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 2, 2 (1985): 91-114.

Representations can be communicated in a variety of ways, and one of these mechanisms is the one-sided narration¹⁸, where, for instance, traditional media organizations communicate particular representations to their audiences. Even if these narrations are one-sided, these representations are still interventions in political struggles, in particular because they do not allow for immediate responses on the same (media) platforms, and are thus powerful and strong voices. This special issue provides many examples of how the struggle over representation takes place through one-sided narration, mostly of hegemonic discourses:

- Zelizer’s article (“When the Wrong Kind of Authority Neutralizes Journalism”) discusses how an (hegemonic) other-enemy construction¹⁹ is created in and by the US mainstream press, through the journalistic practices that maintain, even today, a Cold-War narrative structure;

- Carpentier’s visual essay (“Deconstructing Nationalist Assemblages”) deals with the one-sided narratives that Greek-Cypriot memorials communicate, offering a series of hegemonic-nationalist representations of the other and the self;

- Carpentier et al.’s article (“De-naturalizing Antagonistic Nationalism through an Academic Intervention”) discusses the attempt to produce an academic counter-narrative (which is still one-sided) aimed at de-naturalizing the hegemonic-nationalist narrations about the other-enemy in Cyprus, employing a less conventional means of communicating academic knowledge, namely that of a photo exhibition.

In other cases, the mechanism of debate and dialogue is used to struggle over representations. Different from the one-sided narrations, we can see multiple voices present, (almost) immediately interacting with each other on the same platforms. Also here, we can find many examples in our special issue:

- Svensson’s analysis (“Lurkers, Opponents and the Struggle for Recognition”) engages with political struggles over two ideological projects related to issues of redistribution and migration, and how active participants struggle, with each other, over the minds of their lurking audiences;

- Berger and De Cleen’s article (“Interpellated Citizens”) analyses a citizen deliberation process (about health care reimbursement in Belgium) and focusses in particular on how the citizen (as a subject position) is represented within this deliberative project, and how this representation, in turn, structures the deliberative project;

- Monstad’s article (“Change Processes, Practices of Authority and Communication”) deals more with (attempted) participatory decision-making processes, but these processes also relate to the representational field, as the participation is aimed, in one case study, at (co-)defining the company’s identity (or, in other words, how this identity is represented);

- Prax’s study (“Between Global Competition, Marketing, Deviant Play and Cheating”), focuses on the power relations between “World of Warcraft” players and producers. Even if the players manage to intervene in the online game’s interface, this article also shows the absence of dialogue, due to the lack of recognition of the players’ role and their contribution in the game.

¹⁸ See, for example, S. Hall, “The Narrative Construction of Reality: An Interview with Stuart Hall”, *Southern Review*, 17 (1984): 3-17; D. Rudrum, “From Narrative Representation to Narrative Use: Towards the Limits of Definition”, *Narrative*, 13, 2 (2005): 195-204.

¹⁹ For the construction of the other-enemy see, for example, N. Carpentier, “Introduction: Strengthening Cultural War Studies”, in *Culture, Trauma and Conflict: Cultural Studies Perspectives on Contemporary War*, 2nd ed., edited by N. Carpentier, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015: 1-20.

Finally, as Carpentier's analysis shows, also material constructions intervene in the representational field. Here we can see how material objects, such as the statues and commemoration sites related to the violent conflicts of the Cypriot independence war, and the Turkish invasion of 1974, invite for particular representations that celebrate a nationalist agenda that glorifies soldier-heroes and supports the construction of an enemy. Moreover, this political struggle is also material, as other statues have appeared that support a more pacifist representation of the other.

A second field of struggle concerns *decision-making*. Traditionally, decision-making relates to the authorization of power, to the recognition of one's authority²⁰ in making decisions that affect the environment in which these decisions take place²¹. Decisions then become moments where power is crystallised, recognised, attributed, and contested. This immediately implies that decision-making forms another key field of struggle, where different actors struggle over the outcome of these decision-making processes. But there is also an on-going struggle over the *nature* of decision-making processes, where attempts are made to democratize decision-making processes, rendering them more participatory²².

– Monstad's two case studies are examples of this struggle over decision-making, and its participatory intensity, whether these decisions concern the identity of one company, or another company's production processes. In one of the two case studies, the mechanism of debate and dialogue works well. It supports the participatory process, increases the general work satisfaction, and contributes to production process improvement. In the second case study, the opposite happens, as an attempted dialogue is transformed into a one-sided narration, combined with the silence of the employees;

– Berger and De Cleen present another example of the struggle over decision-making through the mechanism of debate and dialogue, this time regarding health care policies, and the participation of Belgian citizens in this dialogical process. One level of decision-making concerns the participatory question on who is invited and engages in these deliberation processes (and thus, who is entitled to represent the public/citizenry); another level of decision-making concerns the question on who gets to decide on public health care policies (also in the end);

– Decision-making struggles often involve implementation phases, and thus the mechanism of material construction is activated, as Prax's study shows. In this case, the field of struggle, between gamers and the game company, is about who gets to decide on the game's interface, and who is entitled to make changes and to what degree.

The third field of struggle that becomes visible in our special issue relates to *technology*. Technology concerns not only the material artefacts, the machines, but also the cultures of use, and the politics that structure this use²³. Political struggles over technol-

²⁰ According to Lindblom, authority exists "whenever one, several, or many people explicitly or tacitly permit someone else to make decisions for them for some category of acts". C.E. Lindblom, *Politics and Markets: The World's Political-Economic Systems*, New York: Basic Books, 1977, 17-18.

²¹ For the processes of decision-making, see the work of R.A. Dahl (1957), but also, of his critics, P. Bachrach and M.S. Baratz (1962). Dahl's critics argued that the political sociologist focused on the visible processes of decision making, while neglecting less visible and "back-door negotiations and deals that rarely come to public attention" (Scott, 2001: 57). J. Scott, *Power*, Cambridge: Polity, 2001; R.A. Dahl, "The Concept of Power (1957)", in *Power, Critical Concepts Vol. 2*, edited by J. Scott, London: Routledge, 1994; P. Bachrach, M.S. Baratz, "The Two Faces of Power (1962)", in *Power, Critical Concepts Vol. 2*, edited by J. Scott, London: Routledge, 1994.

²² N. Carpentier, *Media and Participation: A Political-Ideological Struggle*, Bristol: Intellect, 2011.

²³ See, for example, A.W. Brian, *The Nature of Technology*, New York: Free Press, 2009; E. Morozov, *The Net Delusion*, New York: Public Affairs, 2011.

ogy, over how to materially construct these material artefacts but also how to use them – and through this use, how to make sense of one’s life – have a constant presence in all spheres of private and public life. Especially two of our articles deal with the struggle over this technological field:

– Thorén and Edenius’s study (“Digital Disconnect and Assemblages of Power”) on two phone assemblages²⁴ – the iPhone and its ‘non-digital’ analogue pendant, the Light Phone – shows how these assemblages serve as one-sided narrations. They communicate very particular meanings in relation to what (the phone) technology is and should be, and what a telephone user is and should be. In this sense, the Light Phone, as a material object and through its own materiality (of course, each entangled in competing discourses), takes a counter-hegemonic position in the struggle over the meaning of communication technologies, and the practices of their users.

– Prax’s case study also deals with the struggles over the material construction of technology. Here, the game players’ community and the company’s producers, engage in a struggle over how the online game’s interface should be built, and by whom, which opens up discussions about ownership of the interface, and the recognition of the skills, labour and rights of the so-called modders, users that (try to) modify the game interface.

This special issue only offers a snap-shot of the complexity of political struggles, the fields over which the struggles are waged, and the mechanisms that are used to wage these struggles. Even if many other fields and mechanisms can be distinguished, this special issue hopefully provides an already rich overview of the different fields and mechanisms that play a role in political struggles. Moreover, and even more importantly, this special issue shows the omnipresence and variety of political struggle in contemporary society, and the relevance of this concept for the study of social phenomena in the 21st century.

²⁴ For an elaboration on assemblage theory, see M. De Landa, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, London: Continuum, 2007.