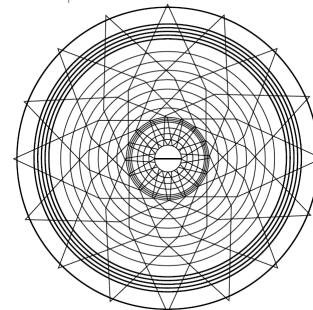


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DISCOURSE-THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CLASS, POPULISM AND PARTICIPATION. AN INTERVIEW WITH NICO CARPENTIER

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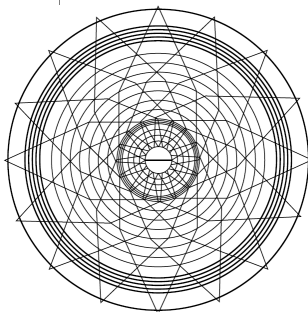
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Yiannis Mylonas interviewed Nico Carpentier in June 2019, in Moscow, at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, during his visit to NRU HSE.

YM: We can start with some issues related to the ontology of discourse theory. In particular, I would like us to discuss the notion of identity, which is central for the politics and political strategies that discourse theory, as a political philosophy, is concerned with. These relate to a postmodern turn, which has stressed social demands related to identity concerns, such as gender and race equality, and recognition and inclusion of various forms of “minorities”. In this discussion, which proliferated in the 1990’s, the notion of class has been backgrounded and undermined. Class has been seen by post-structuralists as a rather essentialist identity feature developed by Marxist theory. Although Laclau and Mouffe did not negate the dimension of class (Schou, 2016: 301), they argued that class should not be prioritized while discussing counter-hegemonic political strategies. In my opinion, class remains important because society is still class-configured and divided by class hierarchies. As Raymond Williams (2015: 135) has argued, class division is a characteristic of capitalist society, while class struggle is only a possibility that can emerge from the politicization of inequality and exploitation. What are your thoughts on class, coming from a post-structuralist tradition?

NC: We need to historicize the argument a bit. If you look at Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, a book they published in 1985 and which is seen as one of the core publications of discourse theory, we should remember that, apart from being a contribution to post-structuralist theory, it was also post-Marxist. The book was an intervention in Marxist theory, and I do not think that—if you analyze *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*—they deny the importance of class anywhere. On the contrary, they explicitly refer to its significance. Still, what they also wanted to do, is on the one hand to decentralize class, and, most importantly, on the other, to de-



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essentialize class. For them, class forms one of the significant subject positions. But from a discourse-theoretical position, class is no longer a privileged signifier. We also need to remember that *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, as a book, has quite different parts. In the part on radical democracy, which is very much a reconfiguration of the left and its political strategy, Laclau and Mouffe argue for the creation of a chain of equivalence between a series of social struggles, for instance, struggles about environmental issues, or for migrant rights, or for women's rights. And these politics and political struggles clearly include class-related demands.

This also explains my position. I am not going to defend the old—some would call it traditional, or even vulgar—Marxist position, arguing that class explains everything. I think we have moved way beyond this position. If we look back at the reception of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* in the late 1980's: A considerable number of people, who were using a Marxist perspective, accused Laclau and Mouffe of totally ignoring class, because they did not centralize class. It seems as if, for these critics, there were only two positions possible, where you either centralized class or ignored it. I think that Laclau and Mouffe have attempted to offer a much richer configuration of class, which still makes sense to me.

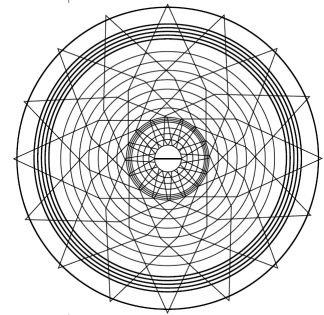
If we take my own work on the discursive-material knot as a starting point, I would firstly argue from a discursive perspective, and say that a class position is an identity. A class position is a subject position. It is a position in a particular discourse, or better, class positions are positions in particular discourses, because the plural matters here. And just as a reminder, even if it is obvious: Even in the traditional Marxist theoretical framework, we can find this plurality of class positions: There was never only a pure dichotomy between the two main class positions. Marxist interpretations did not exclusively focus on the proletariat versus the bourgeoisie juxtaposition. There were many different distinctions and complexities being acknowledged, with theories arguing for different articulations of a diversity of class positions, including, for instance, the *lumpenproletariat*. I would add, still from a discursive-theoretical position, that these different articulations of the class-related subject positions were available to people, who could (and can) chose to identify with particular subject positions and disregard others, explicitly dis-identify with these and/or chose not to have any identificatory relation with them and thus ignore them. In addition, we can take a more material perspective on class, acknowledging that these subject positions are part of always particular assemblages that combine these subject positions with more material elements, such as resources and capital (or their absence).

YM: *Class is definitely also an identity and a subject position. As you say, the material dimension of class also exists and the whole culture of class is also shaped by the materialities of class and the social relations of production. The work of Bourdieu here on class distinction, the works of British cultural studies, point towards*

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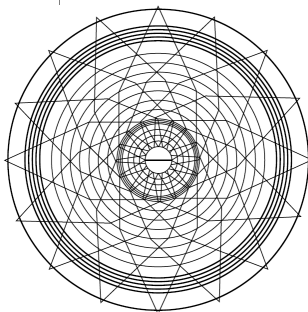


this direction as well. The social relations of production, issues such as inherited privilege, define the social distribution of resources, which are both symbolic and material. They are always interconnected.

NC: That is why the notion of the assemblage, which I place at the ontic level, is important for me. And that is why, at the ontological level, the concept of the knot (or entanglement or whatever else you want to call it) matters. These concepts allow us to think the respectful integration of material and discursive components. In the discussions about class, it is often an either-or position that is taken, where you either defend class as a position that emerges from discourse, or where you go for material structures. We thus arrive in a kind of an absurdity, where we have two separate analytical realities. I would argue that if you want to understand class, you need to see how class consists out of knotted components, and how the identifications with particular class positions (and disidentifications with others) are combined with, for instance, access to resources or not, including the diverse types of capital that Bourdieu has drawn our attention to. Clearly, the discursive-theoretical framework has its value, but we still need to find ways of better reconciling the material component with the discursive component, I would argue. And then I think that the notion of the assemblage can be helpful in thinking through the discursive-material logics of class.

YM: *Let's consider the more political side of class in the sense that identity politics foregrounded a different agenda to that of class-based politics. Critics have identified a middle-class orientation in such a conceptualization of politics and society overall. Here I have in mind the work of Boltanski and Chiapello and their famous book from 2007 "the new spirit of capitalism", where they argue that the rise of the general economic standards after the war in Europe and the US produced what they frame as an "artistic critique" of society, related to demands connected to creativity in the work place, personal autonomy, authenticity and so on. These are surely legitimate demands, but even though they did not deny class, they kind of sidestepped it, as if class conflict was resolved. In effect, societies witnessed a general backlash in the decades that followed, with the hegemony of neoliberalism and market-based modes of governance that brought back huge social inequalities and uncertainties.*

NC: You have to also look at the histories of signifiers. Signifies have their own genealogies, their own histories, and their own logics. Sometimes they disappear, sometimes they get weakened, and in that sense, there are a couple of signifiers that have been debilitated as the outcome of political struggles. I will argue that solidarity is one of these victims. Interestingly enough, I think capitalism as a signifier has also disappeared from the public discussion, becoming victoriously invisible, which is exactly the opposite reason than what explains the invisibility of notions such as class and solidarity. To better understand why class is one of the signifiers that have almost disappeared, I would argue for a historical analysis, not only a power analysis



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but also a historical power analysis, looking at the disappearance or the semi-disappearance of class as the outcome of political struggles that have managed to neutralize class as a signifier.

I do think that the notion of class, as a political signifier, had considerable strength and the capacity to mobilize people under common issues, and that this strength has been lost. You can argue that we need to bring it back, you can defend the return of the political force of the class signifier, but that is obviously not something that an individual alone can achieve. It is the outcome of a long-term social process. We should keep in mind that discourses are not created by individuals, they are social creations. They emerge from political struggles, and once they have disappeared, it takes many signifying practices for them to become part of a discourse again, to become articulated and to become visible again. Of course, there are ways of thinking about class that do not use the particular signifier (of “class”), but other signifiers, such as, for example “ordinary people”. But explicitly using the class signifier is still one of the strategies that we can develop, performing what Foucault called “la mise en discours”. This concept has different layers of meaning; it is to talk (and to use the signifier) but it is also to make an issue out of something. That is what we need to do, in order to put class back on the agenda. Talking about class, and using the signifier class, by evoking its strength again.

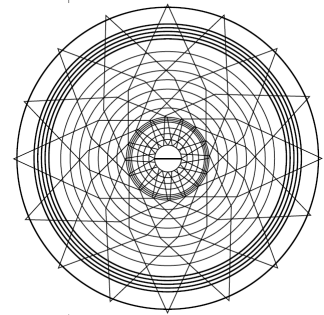
That is one strategy, but there are a number of class-related areas which are connected and that do not directly activate the class signifier, at least not as a main referent point. We can think about discussions on poverty in particular, because that is one of the areas where there is still social interest, and where people still feel quite uncomfortable when being confronted with (the existence of) poverty. It still has emotional value. Jumping from class to poverty and back again is not a complex operation because these two signifiers are intimately connected. Poverty is an assemblage of lack: The lack of education and resources, for instance, and is deeply connected to a series of signifying practices and subject positions. I would still like argue that using the class signifier matters. Starting to use it again, and filling it with meaning again, will strengthen it, but at the same time, it is also important to articulate class with other signifiers, bringing in other signifiers that might be stronger and that can be used in conjuncture with it. To this regard, there is a wonderful English verb, which is to piggyback. This is about jumping on somebody else’s shoulders and being carried by him/her. Adding a little wagon to the train is another metaphor, which is, admittedly, less poetic than piggybacking (smiles). Symbolic piggybacking is probably one of the better strategies to bring class back to the public attention, and I think that the connection of class with poverty would be my best bet from a strategic point of view.

YM: *The issue of class is central in the history of cultural studies and the way that they developed, particularly in Britain. There are different “subaltern” academic*

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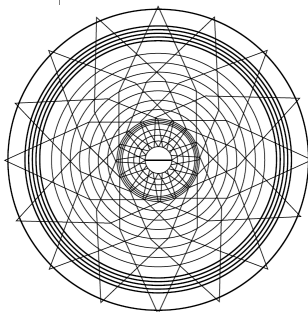
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figures with different ethnicity or class backgrounds, like Raymond Williams, who wrote about working-class culture and approached the study of culture from his own perspective, challenging the more elitist notions of culture that prevailed in the academia during his time. Alongside class, the rather “old-fashioned” term of alienation is also being brought back by scholars such as Bifo (Franco Berardi), or, Slavoj Žižek. In this discussion, the media have a crucial position. Alienation is about class disidentification; it is about identifying with the values and lifestyles of the middle and the upper classes. How can we think about class disidentification and the media, taking into account your work on participation, which also bears in the post-structuralist agenda?

NC: I would see alienation as the outcome of the incorporation into an intrinsically antagonistic assemblage. Somehow, I would be inclined not to restrict this process to class-based assemblages, but to open up the concept of alienation a bit more, by defining it in more general terms. Moreover, I would like to argue that alienation is not only about disidentifications, but also about identifications. But these are particular identifications, because they generate what I have called “discursive dissonance” in the *Discursive-Material Knot* book.

And there is another signifier that is crucial in this debate, connecting with a lot of the things that you just mentioned. This is the signifier of “ordinary people”. I have done quite some work trying to figure out how “ordinary people” are articulated and constructed. One of the wonderful ways that John Hartley (1994) put it—ages ago—is that “ordinary people” is a euphemism for, and erasure of, class. With that wonderful statement, I think that he made a very decent point about the articulation of “ordinary people”. “Ordinary people” are articulated in a wide variety of ways, sometimes in more antagonistic ways, opening the door for alienation. The complexity of these different layers of signification moves us away from the exclusive emphasis on the working-class/proletariat vs. the bourgeoisie dichotomy. “Ordinary people”, as a subject position, has different layers of meaning embedded in it. First, you have “ordinary people” as “everybody”; in this articulation, we are all ordinary people. Then, another way of defining what “ordinary people” are, is when this term is used in contrast to the diversity of societal elites. Then, you have a new dichotomy, a more contemporary way of articulating the proletariat vs. the bourgeoisie dichotomy, by working with the concept of “ordinary people” and contrasting it with “the elites”. There is more, because you also have a third way of articulating “ordinary people”, by defining “ordinary people” as the marginalized, as the subaltern, as the primitive. And here, the concept does connect to the working-class subject position, obviously, because of the social hierarchies that allow looking down on “ordinary people”; they then become seen as “just” “ordinary people”. In this articulation, “ordinary people” comes to signify the marginal, or rather, the marginalized parts of society. The complexity of the signifier “ordinary people” also shows the complexity of class because in contemporary societies class is no longer stable. It is no longer characterized by the original dichotomy. In this sense, the signifier of class is mapped



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in different ways and needs be approached accordingly. This discussion also allows us to think about the position of the middle-class through the signifier “ordinary people”. Is the “middle-class” also the “ordinary people”? Are they marginalized too, are they also the ones that are potentially marginalized, or, at the same time, can we really perceive the middle class to actually be part of the elites?

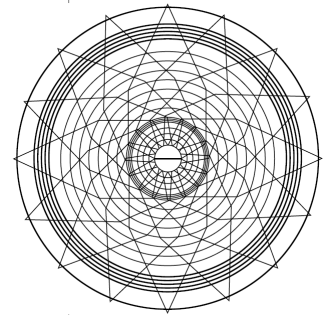
I think that one of the ways of thinking about class subject positions is not to take the middle-class signifier at face value. We can try to deconstruct the middle-class signifier through the logics of the “ordinary people”, because if we call the middle class “ordinary people”, then they are not articulated as part of the societal elites. In that sense, they may also be in need of empowerment and there might need to be an emancipatory—I would say participatory—project for them too, allowing these groups to become empowered as well. And of course, this is not to replace the working-class by “new victims”—the middle class—but I do not want to fully accept the new juxtaposition between middle class and working class either, because in contemporary societies the middle class is not that strong. The middle class does not constitute a safe position. I think, for instance, that countries like Greece have shown, in horrific ways, how vulnerable the middle classes can be, exactly because they are not part of the elite. It is thus significant, for the analysis of social structures and the threats that people have to face nowadays, to use the conceptualization of the elites versus the ordinary people.

This dichotomy, keeping in mind that the signifier “ordinary people”, to some degree, incorporates parts of the middle class, concerns the distributions of power in a variety of discursive-material assemblages, where people take positions in social hierarchies and find themselves integrated into weak assemblages, or incorporated in strong but antagonistic assemblages. We have created this idea of the middle class as a safe haven, as a group of people that are living the good life. This is a myth and an intellectual trap that we have accepted too much. Accepting this logic produces an impossible position, because then you may have to argue that the working class is actually insignificant, which only contributes to their symbolic annihilation. At the same time, you may start celebrating the middle class as this ultimate safe space, which I think is also not true. So I would argue for a deconstruction of middle-class positions, by trying to think about class positions as being part of an assemblage of privileged vs non-privileged dimension. In contemporary societies, privileged vs. unprivileged, and elite vs. ordinary constitute helpful ways of understanding society, as these categories capture similar mechanics as those captured by class in the 19th century, yet dealing with a different world, in the contemporary, 21st century. I would not give up on class but I am arguing to focus on the creation of chains of signifiers that may mobilize people. Instead of somehow investing everything in one signifier only, we need to be strategically working with several, allowing them to enrich each other.

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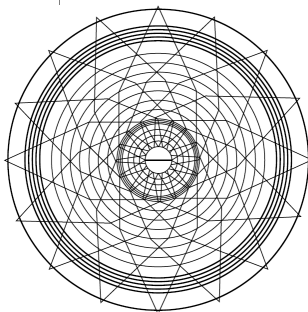
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YM: What I also want to stress here is that often enough, there can be some rather problematic identifications with the middle class, which function in favor of the most privileged. To use an example from my native Greece, during the latest (July 2019) national elections there, both main rival parties, Syriza (the “Radical Left Coalition”) and ND (the conservative, “New Democracy” party) tried to speak in the name of the middle class. The middle class was the targeted audience of both parties. With the victory of ND, the middle class was seen by some mainstream analysts to have punished Syriza, for over-focusing on the “lower” classes and on failing to attend to the most dynamic parts of society, which is assumed to be the middle class, and which has the capacity to produce economic recovery and “development”. This assumption is quite problematic though, because when Syriza was in power, it also followed the Troika-led austerity policies that generally privilege the upper-classes to the expense of the middle and working classes. Simultaneously, the 2008 global economic recession, had detrimental effects on the middle class (as well as on the working classes) due to the neoliberal policies followed, particularly after the crisis. To return to the British cultural studies again, various scholars (for instance, Beverly Skeggs - 2003) argue that the middle class often mediates to the lower classes the ideology, the tastes and the aspirations of the upper classes. Furthermore, in their efforts for social elevation, the middle class identifies with and supports the interests of the upper class.

NC: I agree with that. This is the fantasy of the middle class. Instead of accepting the myth of the “American Dream”, the possibility of upward mobility and gaining wealth, which is the fantasy of moving into the upper classes, I think we need to recognize the existence of a new myth, which is a different way of articulating the middle-class identity. This myth concerns the idea of having a good life; maybe not the life of the rich but a good life, which is stable, and not threatened. This new myth is not a new American dream—that would be too simple—but there is a new class dream that has been created, and which became articulated with the middle-class position. It is the idea that if you work hard enough, you will create this good life for yourself; you will be safe, your children will be safe, you will be able own a house, to travel and so on. All these elements became integrated into the middle-class identity, with a fantasy element in there. Fantasy, in the Lacanian sense, acknowledges the productive nature of these desires, that motivate us to try to achieve them, even if their full realization is impossible. The fantasy of the good life has played that role, although it entails a very dark side, as this good life turns out to be extremely fluid and extremely vulnerable. And even if the middle-class dream is different from the “American dream”, it still has the same structure and the same role to play, to render the middle classes blind for the existence of people that are in working-class positions, and for the poor, and for the subaltern. It denies their misery; it makes their misery invisible, while it also makes the vulnerability of the middle-class positions invisible.



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YM: Let us try to connect this discussion with the issue of populism, which has been prominent in discourse-theory-related research. We can take the example of Syriza again, and its elective victories in Greece in 2015. Syriza managed to form a broad coalition between different social classes (in particular with the working and middle classes), different groups and even different political agents. Syriza's alliance with the party of Independent Greeks, a nationalist right-wing party, shows the broadness and potentially the limits of such a strategy, as their recent defeat in the last (July 2019) Greek national elections showed, along with their failure in dismantling austerity politics. To this regard, we can also think about Varoufakis' strategy, where, as Syriza's initial Finance minister in 2015, attempted to develop a rather Habermasian deliberative strategy in convincing the EU's finance ministers to dismantle austerity. In his 2018 book, "Adults in the room" he stresses how he developed a perfect anti-austerity and pro-EU argument, which was nevertheless fully disregarded as unrealistic and not taken seriously by his fellow EU politicians. Obviously, it takes more than a good argument to develop successful oppositional, or, counter-hegemonic—to use a more Laclauian language—strategies. What are your thoughts on populism and on counter-hegemonic strategies today, given the recent focus of post-structuralist research on this issue?

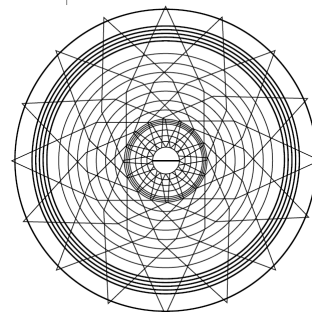
NC: It may be wise to take a few steps back first. One of the basic starting points in the post-structuralist tradition is that the idea that a consensus is basically hiding conflict. The social field is driven, I would agree—following this post-structuralist tradition—by conflict. Here, it is important to stress that when we refer to conflict, it does not necessarily mean violent conflict. It is about the differences that come out of social heterogeneity, which produces different identities, different material realities, different discourses, different identifications, different interests, different demands, and so on. We have to incorporate this diversity, that characterizes our contemporary societies, into our understanding of these societies, and acknowledge that the ultimate consensus—where everybody agrees—is utopian, and another fantasy. Nevertheless, there are the logics of hegemony, meaning that there are dominant ways of thinking, but that does not mean that these discourses control everything. It simply means that they have achieved an illusion of consensus through the power they yield.

A lot of progressive politics are engaged in such a struggle, with what now is turning out to be a right-wing hegemony that is continuously growing in strength, in different parts of the world. We have, of course, a very long neoliberal tradition but we also see the rise of more protectionist economic models. In a way these have become articulated into a cluster of hegemonic forces that are all driven by privilege. Neoliberalism and protectionism may be totally different projects, but they both legitimate privilege. This does not mean that we cannot resist this hegemony. There are indeed different politics trying to resist and to articulate other ways of thinking, keeping the good old alter-globalization slogan in mind: "Another world is possible."

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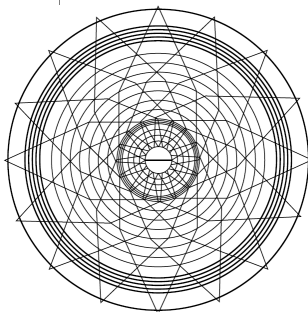
That's what basically left-wing politics is trying to do, but with only limited degrees of success.

In this discussion, it is also vital to emphasize that populism does not “belong” to right-wing or to left-wing politics. It is a particular ideological structure, often articulated with other ideological projects. Benjamin De Cleen's (2012) work on the Belgian Vlaams Blok (which later changed its name into Vlaams Belang) showed that this particular extreme right-wing party used a cluster of discourses, articulating their populism with authoritarianism, nationalism and conservatism. Generally, you can have different articulations as there is no God-given articulation for a political process. Therefore, populism can be articulated with different ideologies, making it in some cases left-wing, and in other cases right-wing.

Simultaneously, I have some reservations with some of the post-structuralist versions of populist theory. What I very much agree with, and what I find very precious in Laclau's work, but also in the work of Stavrakakis, Glynos, De Cleen and others, is that populism is an ideology that is characterized by a particular structure: A combination of horizontality and verticality. Populism creates the signifier of “the people”, which is a unifying force that pitches “the people”—or a signifier that plays the role of “the people”; it can also be another signifier articulating the identity of “the people”—against an old elite that is basically seen as betraying and misrepresenting “the people”. This implies that we have a horizontal structure, based on a unified people, and a vertical structure, based on the people vs. old elite juxtaposition.

I would add that in populism, there is a third component at work; besides the articulation of “the people” as the unifying force, and the articulation of the old elite that has betrayed the people, there is, thirdly, a new elite that is very keen on replacing that old elite, by claiming to be truly representing the people. I believe that this third component is vital in talking about populism. Do not forget that I also have a strong grounding in participatory theory, besides discourse theory. What I see in a lot of populist projects, wherever they are situated on the left/right-wing politics dimension, is the need to create a new elite. I find that rather problematic. Here is what I sometimes have called “the lie of populism”. There is an ideological construction that promises perfect representation, perfect horizontality, by removing the old elite from power and thus by removing the vertical dimension from politics. But perfect representation does not exist, and populist projects aim to bring in a new elite (and a new verticality) through the backdoor.

This is why we need to be careful when arguing for a left-wing populism, as we may be enhancing the rise of new elites. From a participatory theoretical position, I would argue for more decentralized logics that do not create new power centers, but that redistribute power instead. I think that we have seen many left-wing and right-wing hierarchies getting out of hand, so there are good reasons to be careful. On the



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other hand, I am not going to argue for a total decentralization, but I *will* argue for stronger decentralized positions. This does not exclude leadership, by the way. I have nothing against leadership, but I prefer participatory-democratic leadership and not a new elite that actually again claims, as so many have done before, to represent the people but in the end only represent the privileges or the interests of a very particular social group. This also implies that the state needs to be reconfigured in order to assume a more empowering role. I prefer not see the state remain a powerhouse of the elite, but to become a state that assumes a more coordinating and facilitating role, with political structures that are much less hierarchical and much less vertical than they are now.

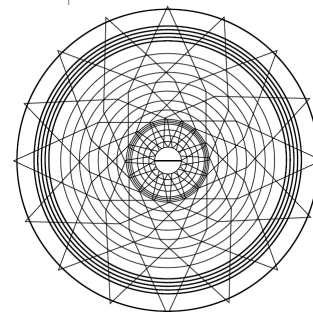
I would argue that besides rethinking the role of the left, and besides the attempts to convince the left to embrace populism as a political strategy, as Chantal Mouffe's (2019) recent book also suggests, a long-term perspective is needed, which is concerned with the reconfiguration of representative democracy, and with the development of structures that are much more decentralized. Besides the state, contemporary societies consist out of a multitude of structures, organizations, groups, many of which could become more decentralized. The work place, educational systems, civil society, medical systems, there are lots of places where the logic of decentralization can be deployed. Besides focusing on left-wing populism, as an almost exclusive strategy, we also need to develop a long-term vision on where to take that specific left-wing populist project. How are we going to use it? Where can it take us? In that sense, at the moment, there is something rather fundamental missing. I would say that there is a need to create new ideological projects on the left, that have, besides the populist construction articulated with the left project, a whole range of signifiers. And yes, this will have to include class, but from a more intersectional perspective.

YM: With regards to participation and the media in particular, we have seen a lot of positive developments, connected to the logics of decentralization that you described. We can think of the rise of peer-to-peer structures from the late 1970's and onwards, and along with other developments (related, for instance, to deregulation policies), the change of the professional and organizational structures of the media institutions. We see more horizontal production processes, more informal and amateurish ones that are more inclusive than before and more participatory. Simultaneously, the recent years have also seen some darker sides of media participation in particular, connected to the use of social media and the Internet by far-right populism, neofascist and neonazi groups, spreading misinformation, conspiracy theories, hate speech, while organizing physical attacks to targeted groups of people. So, there is the anti-democratic participation and the rise of anti-publics in Bart Cammaerts (2008) sense. We can also add the post-fordist restructuring of work in the broader picture of participation, which corresponds to new models of exploitation, as Fuchs (2015) and others have

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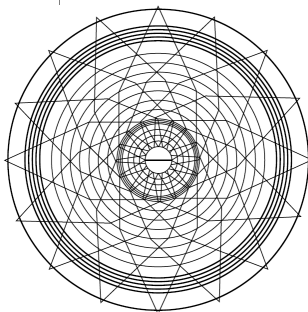
described. Here too, participation is economically productive, but not very democratic.

NC: I have to start by saying that just one signifier cannot produce ideology. Populism cannot, participation cannot. One of the intellectual problems for, for instance, developing a left-wing ideology for the 21st century, consists out of the articulation of such signifiers into a new ideology, without privileging one particular signifier, whether that is class, populism or participation. I will never defend participation of the ultimate solution to everything; to put it in such terms, would be a severe case of hubris. Next, it is important to explain that I define participation in a particular way: The key element of the definition of participation, for me, is the decentralization of power, or better, the equalization of power relations. Participation is about sharing power, and much less about taking part. The latter is the more common definition of participation, which I think is too broad, as it incorporates almost all human practices.

If we take participation as the equalization of power relations, then there is lots of space for hope. At the same time, there is a still lot of work to be done because we are living in a world that remains fairly centralized, where clusters of elites have significant power positions and privileges. Still, we also have the instruments at our disposal to participate and to actually take part in the decision-making processes, whether this concerns engaging in mediated discussions, or having a say in urban planning, or There is a strange paradox at work here, which I think that is characterizing the period that we are living in. Before, I have called this the “era of the both”. On one side, there is a dark analysis that is pointing towards privilege again, but on the other side there is clearly a whole range of participatory practices that have allowed people to engage and struggle with these elites.

Of course, people have interacted during the entire history of humankind. But there is a difference between interaction and participation. Interaction is the performance of socio-communicative relationships, such as, for instance, talking to each other. Interaction also describes the process of going online, operating a computer to post something. We can also interact with texts, interpreting them. Interactions, though, are not necessarily the same as participations, because the latter requires the re-distribution of power.

If we focus on participation, and take a *longue durée* approach, focusing on long and structural historical changes, then we have to acknowledge that the power position of people has improved in the past 200 years. We might lose this democratic progress again, of course, but things have changed significantly, in many countries. The situation is different across the world, not every country in the world allows people to speak freely, for instance, but taken as a whole, there are degrees of improvement. Returning to the “era of the both” argument: This is the optimistic analysis. Our world has changed for the better; we have moved away from the feudal period, we have moved away from the cruelty of the industrial revolution, we have



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moved away from colonialism, at least to a considerable degree. And we moved into an area where there are degrees of participation. But then, the fantasy of maximalist participation kicks in, in many different ways. This fantasy is about the totally horizontal society. Somehow, people sometimes desire for that degree of empowerment. But behind that fantasy is the idea that we have actually achieved that fantasy. We have not. Instead, we are dealing with elites that have managed to control substantial parts of the resources and decision-making processes in many different parts of the social. An example, absurd at first sight, might be the following: If you go to the hospital, what happens to your body? Which decisions can you really make, and what degree of empowerment do you have if you are ill? Or, even worse, which is one of the more understudied issues in participatory studies: What happens if you go into a home for the elderly? What power position do you have there? It is disappointingly limited. Senior citizens are often treated like little children, which also means the utter elimination of their power position. More broadly: You can also look at many other stigmatized groups and how they are treated institutionally. In the “era of the both”, we are not doing that well, but nevertheless you have elite actors, who are constantly invoking the idea that we have reached the point of maximalist participation. In a way, this repertoire recuperates the aforementioned American dream but in a different formulation. Here, participation comes to literally replace the American dream, arguing that the participatory project has been achieved, and that we are now living in a participatory society. That was one of the biggest points of discussion with Henry Jenkins (Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013), who argued that we are living in a participatory culture. I argued for a more careful position, and we amicably agreed that we are currently situated in a “more participatory culture”. It is a relative notion. But if you take the concept of the decentralization of power—the horizontalization of society—and if you use this concept as your reference point, we are nowhere close.

YM: If I could add, there are also global variations. A lot of these developments often happen mostly in the west, and in some parts of the West in particular, as there are third and fourth worlds within the first world as well.

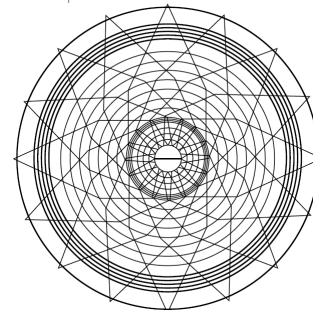
NC: Yes, and we should not fall into the trap of Western myopia when talking, for instance, about participation without referring to the non-Western world. But it is also much broader. This brings us back to the discussion on materiality, and on resources in particular. What is the use of having all the technologies available to speak your mind when you do not have the resources or the time to engage in civic affairs? So yes, there is this typical Western thing to focus on our achievements and to forget that a) our achievements are maybe not always that substantial and b) that in other countries things are maybe more or less problematic.

Possibly, this is a part of the imperialist leftovers that we still have to learn how to cope with. Often enough, there is an abuse of the participation signifier to

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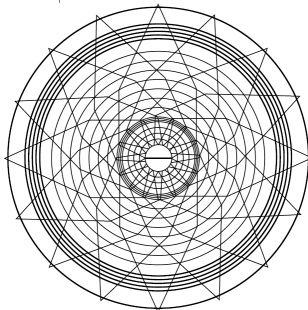
exaggerate the participatory intensities, referring to what are actually minimalist forms of participation. Ironically, power imbalances can easily be legitimized through the concept of participation. This is a totally perverse strategy, which is at the same time extremely efficient, as one hides inequality by affirming that we are all equals now, on the basis of the possibility of participation. It is a post-political (or post-democratic) and extremely efficient strategy. If you want to experiment with concepts, you could call this a post-participatory strategy: Claiming to have reached participation and closing the conversation about it, while the current power relations are still strongly imbalanced. In analogous terms, the post-democratic argument says that we have reached democracy so we do not need to speak about it anymore. Such processes are highly political, as they legitimate political interventions by claiming that they are actually non-political situations.

This is one of the theoretical problems in participation studies; Some practices appear to be participatory, or are labelled participatory on formal grounds, while they are not. I have been trying to figure out how to position myself in these debates. I find myself in a rather uncomfortable position because I end up in a position which moves even further away from common sense usages of participation. Coming from democratic theory, my argument would be that participation is inherently ethical. There is no good or bad participation, as there is also no good or bad democracy. They are just democracies, democratic practices, with different balances of power delegation and participation, and there are participatory practices, with different intensities. I do think that the outcomes of participatory practices can sometimes be deeply problematic, but I think we should not conflate participatory practices with their outcomes. To be short, I have noticed that the label of “bad participation” is used sometimes, but for me this is a conceptual contradiction.

YM. Are you referring to far-right practices online?

NC: Yes, I was referring to the instance of the extreme right. I always give a rather radical example to think about this theoretical question: Let us suppose that a group of neo-Nazis decides, in the most decentralized, horizontal and “participatory” way, to go and kill an immigrant. Procedurally speaking, this is a participatory process. But for me, it is not, because the objective of the participatory process is outside democratic culture. I cannot use the concept of participation here, because I do not think that this is participatory, simply because particular procedures have been followed. Participation is more than procedures. There are related questions: What do you do with a pogrom? What do you do with a lynch mob? Because you could argue that procedurally they are participatory practices. There may be a collective decision-making process there too. But it is meant to destroy, it is antagonistic, it is violent, it is murderous.

YM: The practices of the far-right though are very rigid. They have their leaders, with who the followers are merely agreeing.



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NC: You are, of course, right about leadership, and the social pressure to obey, but I do not think you can reduce the so-called followers to mere followers. These leaders create agreement, but far-right sympathizers still have a say. These dynamics are pretty complex.

YM: But there is hardly anything like a deliberation process there. And there is no disagreement.

NC: There is an invitation to participate though (smiles).

YM: I agree that they are participating. But they are not engaging with democratic procedures.

NC: Yes, here we agree. And my point is that this absence of democratic culture renders a process like this non-participatory. I would argue that participation is necessarily connected to democracy. In other words, if a so-called participatory process stops being democratic, it also stops being participatory. It is a difficult argument to make because it goes against the common sense use of the concept of participation. But on the other hand, a lot of the theoretical work that I have been doing on participation goes against common sense meanings (grins). One instance is when I argue for a much more restrictive definition of participation, that uses the redistribution of power as core defining element, and which makes it different from interaction. The concept of participation also becomes restricted because it is articulated with democracy. Participation and democracy are, for me, intertwined. They are part of an assemblage. There are other restrictions. For instance, I would also argue that participation is invitational. One needs to have the right *not* to participate. If participation becomes obligatory, it again stops being participation. After all, how can you have a decentralization of power, if participation is enforced?

YM: So then in that sense, participation has a normative dimension.

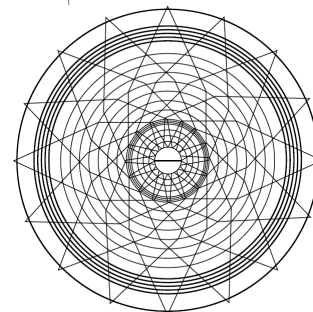
NC: Yes, there is a sense of normativity. My point here would be that participation is in itself ethical. The redistribution of power is ethical. Of course, this is my ethical position (smiles). At the same times, I want to be a bit careful, because we should also study participatory intensities in an analytical way, and not reducing everything to the discussions about the normative and the ethical. We should also study participation, see how it works and what particular participatory intensities are present in particular processes, without immediately imposing normative frameworks. When doing participatory research, I actually like to work in two stages, first at an analytical level, and then at a normative level.

YM: Let's return to discourse theory and post-structuralism a bit. The question here is what are the limits of contingency? It is a fine concept and it is very useful for the theoretical analysis of social phenomena. At the same time how much can we actually do with this concept? We can, for instance, think that everything is contingent as everything social is historically produced. Thus, the nation and

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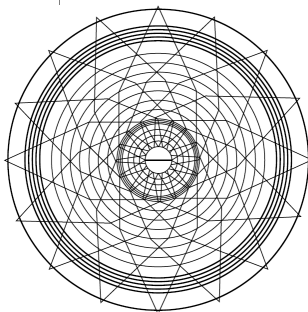
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national identities, capitalism itself among other things, are contingent, historical constructions that are also based on sedimented ways of thinking. Nevertheless they are more than ideas; they cannot just change if we merely change our way of thinking about them; not to say about how to change mindsets on a broad societal level.

NC: Let me start with an optimistic answer. I usually explain discourse theory as a theory of hope, because contingency implies the possibility of re-articulation; the possibility of re-articulation means the possibility for social change and the opportunity of creating a better world. Contingency thus allows us to think about the bettering of society. I confess (smiles): This is a very humanist position. The problem is, of course, that this is only the optimist version of contingency, because contingency also functions as a reminder that we can construct democratic regressions, and, in the end, create horrific new societies, a “Brave New World” 2.0, 3.0, or 4.0. Contingency entails the hope for improvement and betterment, but simultaneously, contingency also allows to formulate a very grim warning that everything we have now and everything that we value may actually be lost. From this perspective, contingency is a neutral concept. And of course, the definition of improvement itself is also a social construction, and also part of a political struggle. The sense of improvement depends of competing ideologies and varies. Therefore, there is even less of a guarantee. One could argue that such a way of thinking is rather depressing and immobilizing, but it is also important to be warned. These warnings are better than naively believing that the current order of things will exist forever. Therefore, contingency has a particular charm, in the sense that it allows thinking through future perspectives. Some may actually find the idea that everything is fundamentally contingent in itself to be immobilizing and incapacitating. This is something that we have to be careful with, because even though we may argue that things can change, this does not mean that everybody’s comfortable with such a prospect (smiles). Contingency is a very precious idea in understanding political interventions, though, but one needs to be a bit careful, also because we cannot not know where every change that we advocate for may actually land.

There is also another, almost inverse discussion, which is related to the opposite of contingency, which is hegemony. This returns us to the limits of contingency. One of the interesting questions I get from students is: “Where do you see hegemony?”, combined with the request for examples. It is not a question that is that easy to answer; capitalism is one answer, of course, but it is not that straightforward as an example. One of my best examples in this respect is war, and more specifically, the idea that war is the legitimate final instrument for resolving political conflict; this idea has been with us for thousands of years, and I would argue it is hegemonic. It is an idea that we are deeply and tragically stuck in. We find ourselves using structural violence over and over again, believing that the problem will be solved. Presumably, if we destroy the Other, if we destroy the enemy, the problem will disappear. At least, that what we think. The idea of war as solution in the last instance is one of the best



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examples of hegemony that I can come up. Habermas has also created a really good example, with his ideal speech situation, where we structurally assume that the other will not instrumentalize us. Our communicative practice thrives because of the assumptions of communicative rationality and, of the absence of instrumental rationality.

The more absolute examples of hegemony are still rare, though; if you start looking, you often end up with rather messy political struggles over the construction of a hegemonic form of social order, and with the constitution of semi-hegemonies. As an analyst, you start wondering: “Is that hegemony? Is that close to hegemony? Is there some kind of dominant way of thinking, or is it a fight with one main idea and a few contesting others?” When analyzing political struggles, you can place them on the scale between sedimentation and hegemony on the one hand, and contingency on the other. Arguably, it turns out that a middle range ground emerges where most of the action occurs, which is far from opening a space of radical contingency, and far from establishing a full hegemony. This third area, that middle-ground, to use a too linear metaphor, is the area of political struggle where we see some dominance and some contingency at work. This puts the limit on both contingency and hegemony. As these concepts do not work perfectly, I prefer to combine them with the concept of “political struggle”, in order to discuss socio-political phenomena. You constantly find hegemonic attempts working together with contingency. These mechanisms do not occur exclusively. You need to think of them together, and deploy other concepts as well. So, for me this actually draws the limit of contingency and the limit of hegemony, at the same time.

But, finally, I should add that this is not an argument for post-hegemony. I am not convinced by Scott Lash’s (2007) argumentation on this matter, because I think that the concept of hegemony is still vital to understand how politics work. But still, it is really hard to find very clear examples of hegemonies, which should make us careful not to over-use the hegemony concept. A lot of post-structuralist research has been focusing on the cases where hegemony is said to be present, and not so much on the messy cases. I think we should focus a bit more on these political struggles, to produce a better balance and not create the impression that hegemony is the norm, to understand better how such messy processes work, also allowing us to better think through the limits of contingency and hegemony and to analytically see how they actually work.

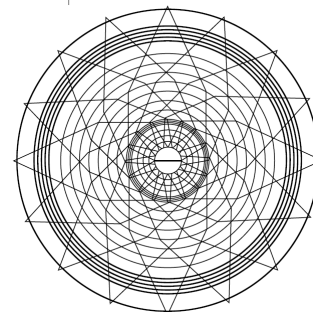
YM: To this regard, an analytical orientated question, connected to your work with De Cleen in developing “Discourse-theoretical Analysis” (DTA), a method of using discourse theory analytically, has to do with how to combine discourse-theoretical analysis and other text analysis methods, such as critical discourse analysis.

NC. The methodological question is interesting because I think that the first thing to emphasize there is that people should use whatever method they feel comfortable

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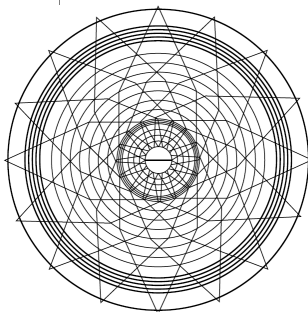


with (smiles). And there is no perfect choice, whatever kind of analytical and methodological approach is preferred. There are better and worse choices for particular methodologies to deal with particular research questions, true, but people need to choose what fits best with their ways of thinking, and their ways of formulating research questions that they feel comfortable with.

I am not going to be too much of the ambassador of discourse theory, but still, I have found it extremely useful because it allows me to analyze the social phenomena that I am interested in, even if I have no hesitation to integrate some of the conceptual tools of critical discourse analysis and linguistics. But my research questions align well with discourse theory. Discourse theory is quite strong at looking at political struggles and at looking at the contingencies and instabilities of the social realm. What I want to do—research-wise—is not to represent the world as a solid totality, but to look at it as something that is constantly in movement, and how these flows are then stabilized, but in always imperfect ways. This allows me to look at a variety of social phenomena, not merely focusing on the study of society's dominant forces, which is all too often what people prefer to do. I prefer to look into the attics and basements of the house, let's say, to look in the corners, in the back alleys of the city, at the underbelly of the city. I find these areas important and these are my reasons for making this specific choice (for using discourse theory). Other people might have other preferences. And at the risk of sounding too personal here: This is a very affective relationship. This is not a mere “rational choice” issue for me. Discovering discourse theory gave me the feeling of “coming home”, arriving in a theoretical home that describes the world in a way that I see, experience and feel it.

YM: People though can question if this is actual science. You may often get questions that imply a certain degree of inherent bias in such forms of research from the more scientific/objectivist point of view.

NC: Let me reply with an old anecdote: Ages ago, in Brussels, I was the director of the Doctoral School of the Human Sciences. We have had three directors in total, apart from me, there was one for the Medical Sciences and one for the Natural Sciences. At one point we had an interdisciplinary PhD and we were asked about how to name this degree. One of my Sciences colleagues said, “Why don't we just call it a PhD in the Sciences?” I argued that this was a fairly imperialist move and that he was very much talking from his paradigmatic position, not really taking mine into consideration. The idea was withdrawn immediately, as they were very gently people who respected my wish, but he did not really see the imperialist claim, I think. This anecdote shows us two things: the one is that there is a permanent struggle going on between different paradigms. Ritzer (1975) called sociology a multi-paradigmatic science, which is a good point, but this struggle reaches much further. The second point is that sometimes we forget that maybe the main struggle is not between the main paradigms in the Social Sciences. A significant part of the academic struggle is between the Natural Sciences, and the Social Sciences and the Humanities. These



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paradigmatic struggles are something that we constantly have to face. Along with these struggles (and because of them), we sometimes experience critiques that may not be that respectful. I would argue that we need paradigmatic diversity and paradigmatic respect and that we should stop trying to convert the other to our own paradigm and method.

YM: Often, you can find yourself in the position of trying to defend that what you are actually doing is relevant for the academia.

NC: And my defense here is that this is not a relevant question. I would argue that the defense strategy that works best is to deconstruct the conflict. I simply refuse to go into this. I will not defend discourse theory against an attack from a different paradigm, because there is no defense possible, and no defense necessary. There is no rational argumentation at the level of paradigms possible. You cannot rationally argue about paradigms, because they are not created out of rationality, but out of affect. I mean, even if I wanted to, I could never convince anybody that is doing quantitative research that s/he should change her/his preferences, because I do not have the arguments to make this point. There is no ultimate argument. The counter-strategy, to deal with these kinds of critiques, is to show what the critics are doing is the privileging of their paradigm over mine and that in the contemporary world of academia, characterized by a diversity of sciences, this does not work anymore.

If you would ask a quantitative researcher, whether he/she thinks that his/her paradigm is the only one, he/she would also get very uncomfortable and would probably not agree with that position. These are the entry points into this discussion. Instead of going for a defensive position, which I will never do, you actually have to go for a reflexive strategy, which questions the critics' questioning, so that a deconstructive move is established. This is something that tends to work and opens up spaces for more constructive—and actually really great—conversations, because then you force the other to think about her/his position, instead of merely trying to defend your own.

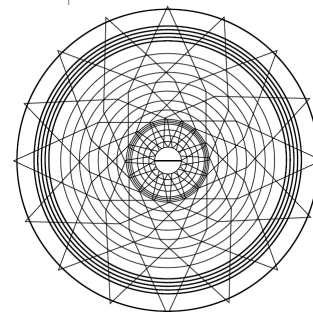
YM: There is also the discussion about the connection of University with the market and the industry. Here, the more applied paradigms, those with the more quantitative and data-orientated paradigms receive more funding, which makes them more popular, and in this sense, more legitimate somehow.

NC: Well, there are differences in what kind of position we, as academics, have in, and towards, the market as well as the industry. In the Humanities, and (to a lesser degree) in the Social Sciences, we are in a disadvantaged position. There is a struggle there, for resources especially. If we deconstruct the current situation, we can see that the Sciences, but also the more quantitative and positivist Social Sciences have managed to construct a particular hegemony, which also means that they have managed to establish their own academic jargon as common sense. This is something that we need to constantly make these colleagues aware of. They have

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a history of, say a hundred years of sociological research that has managed to introduce a specific jargon in the everyday language use, and that has legitimated their approach as common sense. In discourse studies and post-structuralist theory, we do not have that advantage, but it is also up to us to be proud of our language, and our approaches, to make ourselves visible and to engage in this struggle.

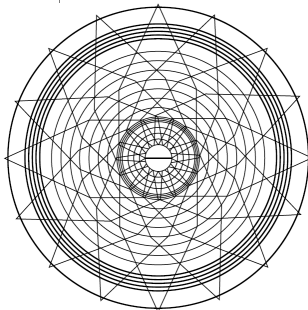
This is also connected to a broader discussion about the role of the University. This is much more fundamental because I think that the problem is much broader. Students may often wonder: “Why would I read that? Why do I need it?” etc., especially when we are dealing with theory. The answer relates to the role of the University itself and what the university does, as a pedagogical project. To this respect, I would say that its role is to confront people with complexity. This is basically what the pedagogical project of University has been for the past 500 years. The confrontation with complexity allows people to develop better ways of dealing with multifaceted situations and complicated issues. The learning experience itself should be to constantly confront them with that complexity, knowing that the confrontation will further develop their intellectual skills.

What we do is to provide people with the capacities to deal with complicated issues. I do not think that we should train people to perform a particular business function, which is not the same as saying that we cannot use professional practice as an academic training method. But offering vocational training is not our role, I believe. What we do is that we provide people with highly developed intellectual frameworks. What we need to do more, which is something that has been neglected during the past decades, is to create legitimacy for that role. As long as we keep on being dragged into other societal fields, as long as we have companies that are telling us to train students for them, so that they do not have to spend their money on doing the training themselves, while at the same time, they will never be satisfied, because universities are too slow to follow the logic of, say technological development in the media industries. We will never be able to play that role, because we are not built for it, and it is not our role to play. We risk here to lose the very base of academia, which will harm our societies in the long run. In this sense, the industry itself will suffer by losing the possibility of engaging people trained to understand complexity.

And to return to post-structuralist theory: Yes, it can be a bit complicated, I admit (smiles), but that also makes it pedagogically so precious. Understanding post-structuralist theory is a challenge though, and I think that this is why a number of people become interested in it. Once you start reading these authors, you do not know how and when you are going to get out of the maze—because a maze it is—but finding these ways out, understanding what the various authors meant, cracking the codes, is part of the amazement and the excitement that these kinds of theoretical frameworks can generate.

YM: *Indeed.*

Thank you very much for a fruitful talk.



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NC: Thank you.

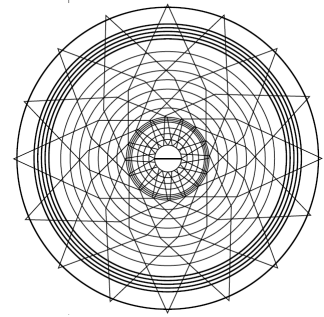
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