ANALYZING EQUIVALENCES IN DISCOURSE: ARE DISCOURSE THEORY AND MEMBERSHIP CATEGORIZATION ANALYSIS COMPATIBLE?

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Abstract

Facing a crucial leap from political philosophy to empirical analysis, the approach to discourse analysis that arose in the aftermath of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), and that is currently known as the Essex school of discourse theory (DT), has in recent years repeatedly been accused of suffering from a methodological deficit. This paper examines to what extent membership categorization analysis (MCA), a branch of ethnomethodology that investigates lay actors' situated descriptions-in-context as practical activity, can play a part in rendering poststructuralist DT notions such as *articulation* and *equivalence* analytically tangible in empirically observable discourse. Based on a review of Laclau and Mouffe's foundational text as well as on Glynos and Howarth's recent exposition of the framework (2007), it is argued that MCA empirically substantiates many poststructuralist claims about the indeterminacy of signification. However, MCA consistently falters - and willingly so - at the point where DT would articulate emerging equivalences between identity categories as part of a second-order explanatory concept, such as Glynos and Howarth's notion of *political logic*. Nevertheless, MCA also contains the kernel of an "endogenous" notion of the political that comes fairly close to DT's all-pervasive understanding of the concept. To support these arguments, a variety of empirical sources are mobilized, ranging from the transcript of a political talk show, a newspaper report regarding a discrimination case in a dance class, to data drawn from earlier research on the way that minority members are treated by the Belgian criminal justice system.

Keywords: Discourse theory; Membership categorization analysis; Ethnomethodology; The political; Articulation; Equivalence chain.

1. A methodological deficit[*]

Three decades after the publication of the ground-breaking *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), a new generation of authors is demonstrating an increasing awareness that the so called Essex school of discourse theory (henceforth DT) faces a crucial leap from political philosophy to empirical analysis. Torfing (2005), for example, notes that in addition to demonstrating the analytical value of its theoretical insights in concrete empirical studies (which should preferably address the

core areas of political science), DT "must critically reflect upon the questions of method and research strategy" (2005: 25). Glynos and Howarth (2007) attempted to alleviate this "methodological deficit" (2007: 6) by laying out a complex framework of ontological presuppositions, theoretical concepts and associated methodological guidelines that allows analysts to be more specific about the methodological choices that they make while addressing particular problems. Still, they do not supply concrete answers to the question of how "poststructuralist concepts […] can be identified and analysed in empirically observable discourse" (Zienkowki 2011: 84).

This paper responds to this query by examining how membership categorization analysis (henceforth MCA), a branch of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) that focuses on description as a practical activity, can contribute to this effort to render abstract notions such as *articulation* and *equivalence* analytically tangible. There is something intuitively appealing to this idea, as MCA's detailed descriptions of how lay actors categorize one another in various contexts of mundane situated activity (Sacks 1972a, Sacks 1972b; Jayyusi 1984; Hester and Eglin (eds.) 1997) seem to offer a unique point of entry for investigating in an incontestably empirical manner how equivalences between different forms of identification are established or, for that matter, contested.

However, this paper explicitly rejects the division of labor proposed by Glynos and Howarth (2007, see also Howarth 2005), according to which it is DT's prerogative to furnish the ontology for critical research and to specify the overarching methodological guidelines that are required for it. The role of "the various tools of discourse analysis" (as developed in sociolinguistics, content analysis, etc.), then, would be confined to providing "one particular set of techniques that can help us to understand and explain empirical phenomena, which have already been constituted as meaningful objects of analysis [by DT]" (Howarth 2005: 318). This proposal is, of course, highly contentious. During the approximately forty years since its inception, MCA has generated a wealth of detailed empirical observations concerning the multiple ways in which descriptions can be accomplished, their sensitivity to the specifics of setting and context, how they may be treated as ground for further inferences, how they are made to relate to another, etc. These empirical observations, however, are in turn grounded in and triggered by specific assumptions regarding the nature of social practice. For this reason, MCA cannot be reduced to a neutral "toolkit" at the disposal of any social theorist in need of "technical" sophistication who might accidentally be walking by. What is needed, rather, is a critical review of those possible points where DT and MCA might sensibly be "coarticulated" with one another (cf. infra) in addressing specific analytical problems as a two-way process rather than as one-way appropriation. Proceeding in this way also prevents us from falling into the objectivist pitfall of reifying method, which Torfing (2005) and Glynos and Howarth (2007) repeatedly warn against.

MCA's analytical appeal lies for a large part in its ability to address the contingent fixation of meaning *in concreto* as an empirically attestable quality of situated discourse. In addition to being responsible for much of MCA's attractiveness, however, this radical empirical orientation at times acts as a source of friction, as it leads to frequent clashes with DT due to the latter's roots in political philosophy. MCA and DT both imply a discursive take on the social field (according to which discursive practices not only "mediate" external forces but integrally "constitute" the social, cf. Torfing 2005: 7ff), but they also hold radically different positions on the relationship between discursive practice and theory. That is, DT grounds its account of the

discursive practices through which the social is constituted in poststructuralist theorizing about the structural incompleteness of signification, while MCA prefers to explicate those practices solely on the basis of the intersubjective understandings towards which the participants themselves can be shown to orient in the course of their talk.

My treatment of eventual correspondences and discrepancies will be organized on the basis of a systematic review of two authoritative DT sources: Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) foundational text and Glynos and Howarth's (2007) *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, which represents one of the most recent and comprehensive expositions of the framework. In the course of the article, a variety of empirical sources will be mobilized, ranging from the transcript of a political talk show, a newspaper report regarding a discrimination case in a dance class, to data drawn from earlier research on the way that minority members are treated by the Belgian criminal justice system (D'hondt 2009 and elsewhere). These data samples will be used in an expository fashion to provide a canvas for playing the two traditions against one another, in an attempt to delineate which aspects of discursive practice MCA is capable of disentangling and which other aspects it declares itself unqualified for. The ultimate aim of this study is to identify those locations where there are sufficient parallels between MCA's empirical insights and DT's theoretical presumptions for some kind of "transfer" of methods to be possible. Eventually, this selective coarticulation of MCA and DT will be consequential for *both* parties. Thus, the final section argues that the dialogue initiated here should in turn encourage MCA to pay more attention to the negotiable, and in theory thus potentially all-pervasive, nature of what lay actors presume to be "political".

2. The articulation of equivalences

Central to the approach to discourse that Laclau and Mouffe develop in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is the *articulated* character of social practices: The fact that their meaning derives from the contingent connections they establish between various otherwise-unrelated semiotic elements. Articulating such a connection is always a two-way operation, as the various identities, narratives, practices, and other signifiers that are made to relate to one another are in turn modified in the articulatory process (1985: 105). The meaningfulness of a practice, it follows, is thus the outcome of an articulation of relatively "unfixed" elements, which reflects the structuralist principle that meaning is rooted in the internal differentiation between signifiers. However, the argument also integrates the poststructuralist critique that such a differentiation cannot be the product of a fully constituted, closed system.

Laclau and Mouffe's notion of articulation is in turn consistent with an overall theory of hegemony that emphasizes the "open" character of the social field and intrinsically contingent nature of social relationships. Antagonisms traversing the social field emerge through the articulation of *equivalences* between signifiers. The articulated equivalences that structure social relationships are in turn held together by so called *nodal points*, overarching signifiers that serve as the cement holding the other semiotic elements in place and that thereby transform the emergent structure of equivalent and differential positions into a discourse (designated by that overarching signifier). To the

extent that such a discourse fixates identities and structures the social field and relationships in a totalizing way, it can be said to have acquired a hegemonic character. However, such fixations can only be temporary. Because of their articulated nature, hegemonies are from the outset incomplete, open to challenge, and therefore fundamentally historical in nature. Every attempt to impose a unity onto the social field is bound to fail, as the articulation of signifiers as equivalent to one another requires a contrast with yet other signifiers that are thereby excluded from the emerging totality. By incorporating these poststructuralist insights on the inevitably contingent and incomplete nature of signification, Laclau and Mouffe claim to be rescuing Gramsci's notion of hegemony from the economic reductionism and class essentialism they consider characteristic of orthodox Marxism.

MCA (Sacks 1972a, Sacks 1972b; Jayyusi 1984; Hester and Eglin (eds.) 1997) focuses on lay actors' attempts to describe, name and classify other people in their environment (and thus appears, at least initially, less ambitious in scope). Sidestepping the question of the empirical correctness of such descriptions-in-context, it elucidates the practical reasoning by which language users arrive at their contextual relevance and appropriateness. Why, for example, is a label like [political activist] sufficient for singling someone out in one context but not in another?[1] Part of the answer lies in the fact that speakers are expected to select their descriptions (or *membership categories*, as they are usually called) in such a way that recipients are able to hear them as part of a "collection" of associated categories (or *categorization device*) relevant to that occasion. Thus, describing someone as a [goalkeeper] may perfectly make sense when describing a soccer match but not in discussing that person's wedding pictures. Other descriptions in the vicinity, and the collections (or *devices*) that they entail, may also play a part in anticipating whether a particular categorization will be understood by the recipients. The antecedent categorization of one individual as a [goalkeeper], for example, may help listeners to disambiguate the subsequent characterization of a second individual as an [attacker] (which might otherwise be unclear). Alternatively, descriptions may also "stick" on the basis of an association with a specific activity in which an individual can be seen, heard, or otherwise assumed to be engaged or with other qualities or characteristics he accountably possesses (*category-bound activities* and *category-bound predicates*, respectively). To borrow an example from Sacks (1972a), categorizing someone as a [mother] may make perfect sense if you must single out a woman (not otherwise known to you) of the "right age" who is busy caring for a baby.

MCA's analytical significance extends far beyond such questions of disambiguation. Of particular relevance to us is its sensitivity to the fact that, in everyday usage, categories are frequently combined in unforeseen ways. The data sample below illustrates how this interest in the local accomplishment of categorizational order can be beneficial to the analysis of equivalences. The data are taken from a Belgian television show, broadcast on a Flemish public network in December 2010, in which influential personalities are asked to review the past year on the basis of self-selected news footage. The broadcast took place six months after the June 13 elections that made the Flemish-nationalist N-VA (*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*, "New-Flemish Alliance") the leading party in the Flemish-speaking part of the country

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[1] For reasons of clarity, identity categories will throughout the paper be enclosed by squared brackets. Collections of identity categories (or *categorization devices*, cf. infra) will be enclosed by double square brackets.

and catapulted it to the forefront of Belgian politics. Still, negotiations over a new federal government (and the necessary constitutional reforms that it would have to implement) had, at that point, reached a stalemate. One of the invitees to the show is Vic Van Aelst, a well-known attorney who recently proclaimed himself to be an N-VA supporter. He selected as his most salient footage the victory speech that N-VA president Bart De Wever gave on the evening of election day. In the discussion that followed, the interviewer remarked that the latter had not yet been successful in converting personal electoral triumph into a breakthrough at the negotiation table. He also pointed out that this evokes memories of the political stand-still that racked the country three years earlier in the aftermath of the 2007 elections, when the then equally popular Flemish Christian-democrat Yves Leterme presided over analogous negotiations that lasted seven months without result. In his reply, the attorney explains why the current predicament is different from the 2007 debacle.

> (1) In 2007, that is three years ago, the French-speaking parties clearly said, "we are not asking anything." They didn't mind about the entire situation, they couldn't care. For them everything was all right the way it was because all the privileges were on their side. I remember all the scandals in Wallonia, which are today not any longer *mentioned*, huh. *Nobody* talks about them anymore, it's all forgotten. Those are the scandals I'm talking about. [In] 2010, they are *slowly* starting to surrender. Why? Because indeed the *true* Flemish have come to power, and they are afraid of that. And *now* they are talking. In 2007, with the traditional parties presiding over the talks, *nothing*. (Ter Zake, December 23, 2010)

Let us first examine the multilayered "opposition" between the participants to the debate established in this account. Next, we will ascertain how connections are forged between items from different devices across the multiple layers out of which the "opposition" is composed. (Quotation marks are in order here because these oppositions in fact *unite* opponents as members of the same device.)

The most elementary opposition is that between the incumbents of the categorization device [[parties to the ongoing negotiation]]. In principle it ought to have been composed of representatives of seven political parties, but the device by which the attorney structures his account comprises only two membership-categories. The first category, [French-speaking parties], brings together a number of political parties on the basis of their linguistic affiliation. The account furthermore attributes a particular psychological predisposition to this language-based aggregate, a proclivity to maintain the status quo "because all the privileges [are] on their side" (elaborated through a cursory reference to "past scandals" now curiously forgotten). Only recently, and unwillingly, did these parties at last agree to negotiate under mounting pressure from the other side. The second category of this device receives no explicit label but takes the form of an "open" slot occupied by different occupants before and after the 2010 elections - a shift in occupancy that was decisive in forcing the French-speaking parties to accept negotiations. The attorney's description of the first member of the device as [French-speaking parties] implies that the occupants of this open slot are [Dutch-speaking parties]. Ordinary usage, however, routinely refers to the latter as [Flemish parties], a categorization that is vague as to whether the belonging it expresses is of an ethnic or linguistic nature.

The second, embedded opposition is between the rotating incumbents of the Dutch-speaking seat at the negotiation table, which constitutes another categorization device in its own right. Interestingly, the membership categories out of which this second device is assembled are in turn identified by means of descriptions drawn from yet other, at first glance, unrelated devices. In 2007, the open seat was taken up by an occupant identified as [traditional parties]. This categorization reflexively evokes the collection of [[[traditional parties], [not-traditional parties]]] and is fully endogenous to the political field. The 2010 incumbents of the open seat, in contrast, are categorized as [true Flemish], evoking a contrast with [Flemish] who are presumably "false" and projecting a device that classifies persons on the basis of the *quality* of their membership in the ethnic category [Flemish]: [[[true Flemish], [false Flemish]]]. The "simple" (unmodified) category [Flemish] on which this second sub-device is based is thus treated as possessing a *moral* quality: It contains a trajectory stipulating how its members *ought* to behave (Jayyusi 1984), which is deducible from the French-speaking parties' response to the take-over of the open seat by the [true Flemish] in 2010 (unlike their predecessors who were never taken seriously, the new incumbents command respect, presumably *because of their stern stance*). Through a careful combination of descriptions from different devices, the attorney's account of the French-speaking parties' incipient consideration of Flemish demands thus invites listeners to attribute contrasting category-predicates to the members of the device [[Flemish parties]]: While [traditional parties] "lack determination" and are "prone to compromise", [true Flemish] are characterized by "persistence" and "resolve". This distribution of category-bound activities and predicates applies to both sub-devices of which the superordinate device [Flemish parties] is composed, allowing the sub-devices to be mapped onto one another.

It is here that phenomena comparable to "equivalences" begin to surface, as certain descriptors out of which this multilayered opposition is composed are locally treated as able to replace other descriptors. Through such contextualized practices of practical reasoning, a connection is established between the allegiance to a political party/ideology and ethnic identity (which results in the construction of a "community" from which political opponents are excluded). The latter represents what Laclau and Mouffe call a logic of equivalence, a dynamic (and thus contestable) effort to monopolize the political field by establishing an equivalence chain. Interestingly, the deployment of this logic of equivalence entails in this instance also self-pity: While the presumed unity of the French-speaking parties is presented as a natural fact (i.e., a social logic according to Glynos and Howarth 2007 cf. infra), the unification of the speaker's own community appears as a political project still under development.

The brief MCA analysis of this fragment and the qualities of everyday reasoning to which it draws attention perfectly illustrate why this approach is relevant to broader investigations of the historical-contestable nature of equivalences and hegemonies. First of all, MCA assigns a central role to the *locally accomplished* and *open-textured nature* of categorization work and of categorizational order. This makes it relatively easy to coarticulate its analytical findings with a theoretical framework that takes the fundamental indeterminacy of discursive structures as its point of departure (although MCA declares itself on principle agnostic about DT's poststructuralist ontology of lack and associated theoretical assumptions, cf. infra). In the case at hand, local accomplishment refers to the fact that the attorney's categorization work (including the equivalence of identity-categories he proposes) must be seen as part of a descriptively economical way of responding to the interviewer's critical remark in the previous slot

by attributing contrasting moral qualities to the successive incumbents of the Flemish seat at the negotiation table. The attorney's web of categorizations and associated predicates (deducible from the French-speaking parties' response to the shift in incumbency on the Flemish side) demonstrates that progress *has* been made (as the French-speaking parties have begun to realize that their position is untenable) and explains *why* progress has been made (because the [true Flemish] won the elections). As such, it helps to expose the fallaciousness of the interviewer's criticism and the validity of the stance endorsed by the attorney. This overarching orientation of this description to the task at hand aptly illustrates that categorization devices are above all deeply "local" constructs, crafted in situ to suit local requirements and carry out locally salient tasks rather than stable cognitive structures stored "inside the head" of the interactants. Accordingly, "[a] device can mean different things and hence can collect different categories on different occasions and in different contexts" (Hester and Eglin 1997a: 18). This observation holds true as well for the associations that lay actors make between categories and their associated predicates. As with "collections" of categories, associations with a particular predicate are both tailored to their respective occasions of usage and reflexively co-constitute these contexts (Hester and Eglin 1997b).

The notion of local accomplishment in turn brings us to another feature of situated categorization work that makes its analysis of interest to DT: the radically *open-textured* character of membership categories. According to Jayyusi (1984: 40-41),

> categories like other concepts (and categorizations like other descriptions) are open-textured. That there are multiple criteria (both formal and substantive) available to members of the culture in the situated application, invocation, production and use of membership categories provides for the multiplicity of language games that can be played with them.

The act of categorizing someone, in addition to evoking a set of associated categories with which it forms a locally salient collection, may also serve as grounds for attributing additional categorizations to that person:

> the use of one categorization sets up a category-rich environment, and implicitly provides for the availability and possible relevance of others because categories do not (nor do discourses) present themselves to us as self-contained discrete boxes - rather they *cross-cut*, *presuppose*, and *implicate* further ones. [...] The embeddedness of various categories in each other is situatedly a resource by which different positions may be articulated, and out of which the diversity of human moral praxis is spun. (Jayyusi 1995: 80)

For Jayyusi, the open-textured character of situated categorizations and the fact that they are mutually embedded are part of a "grammar of multiplicity" (1995: 80), which must be understood as a set of "systematic transformabilities" (p. 81) embedded in the fine details of situated language use and practical reasoning that engender the possibility of differentiation (*and* persuasion). The formal properties of talk thus facilitate assuming a particular stance on an issue (e.g., through the privileging of one set of presupposed or implicated categorizations over another) and make it possible to grasp other positions and argue against them. The above excerpt illustrates how a differential stance is practically accomplished in and through language. Taking Jayyusi's argument

one step further, we could argue that the locally occasioned character and open texture of categorization work also facilitate (and render contestable) the equivalence-through-substitutability that we encountered therein.

It should be obvious by now that MCA's analytical equipment for explicating the practical reasoning by which interactants produce and interpret meaningful conduct offers valuable instruments for exploring the texture of equivalences between identity categories (as one element of the local order that is intersubjectively established in rendering interactional conduct meaningful). It also offers an elegant, empirically grounded account of the transient, contingent character of these equivalences, which may serve as an alternative for DT's theoretical engagement with poststructuralism. By drawing attention to the locally occasioned character and open texture of categorization work, MCA's findings may be seen as lending *empirical substance* to DT's claim that it is impossible for a discourse to achieve totality, i.e., to fully "suture" the discursive field.

Despite the fact that MCA is able to empirically substantiate DT's poststructuralist claims about the indeterminacy of signification, DT's theoretical engagement with poststructuralism is also responsible for significant divergences in the way the two traditions conceptualize the nature of meaning and the semiotic practices through which sociability is constituted. MCA, sticking closely to empirically tangible situated language use, focuses entirely on the "incarnate intelligibility" of conduct *in particular contexts*. Categorization practices are for MCA always tailored to the specific tasks relevant to a particular occasion. Equivalences are thus, in Garfinkel's words, made to happen "for another first time" (1967: 9) on each occasion. DT's central object of concern, in contrast, are *discourses*, abstract configurations of signifiers/differential positions that are not co-identical with instances of actual language use. How they relate to such actual instances remains vague, and this lack of analytical specificity lies at the heart of DT's methodological deficit.

Their disagreement over the nature of the object also affects the way the temporary fixation of equivalences is accounted for. For MCA, the fixation of meaning is as such not an issue. The interactional necessity to render situated practices intelligible requires that categorizations are always in one way or another made to relate to one another. Stabilizing meaning integrally forms part of the local processes of rendering conduct intelligible, tailoring that conduct to the specifics of the context and jointly establishing intersubjective order.[2] For DT, however, the question of how equivalences between signifiers are held together requires explicit theoretical elaboration. In the DT framework, equivalences are stabilized *in abstracto* by means of *empty signifiers* (Laclau 1996), a further development of the notion of nodal points put forward in Laclau and Mouffe (1985). In the case of the attorney's account of the political standstill, the category [Flemish] is the obvious candidate for this status. The most crucial feature of a signifier such as "Flemish" is that it lacks any positive content, and for this reason, the other signifiers of the equivalence chain are able to project themselves onto it. In turn, the empty signifier is able to hold the chain together. However, this very emptiness that makes possible the stabilization of equivalence chains is by the same token responsible for their eventual demise. The signifier's lack of

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[2] As one of my anonymous referees pointed out, MCA's position on this point is nicely captured in Frank's (1988) statement that "[according to Garfinkel,] order is already complete in the concrete" (quoted in Garfinkel and Wieder 1992: 176).

positive content makes it possible for those who are excluded from/by the equivalence chain to reclaim the empty signifier, dismantle the proposed equivalence of signifiers, and erect an alternative hegemony. In the case under analysis, for example, those "Flemish" who are presumably unworthy of the qualification "true" could wage a struggle to impose an alternative structuring of the discursive field and thereby reassert their stake in Flemish identity. The status of "Flemish" as a nodal point is, in this instance, indirectly confirmed by the fact that a subsidiary categorization based on a true-false distinction is called upon for policing its content. The latter is needed to exclude those who qualify as Flemish in a legal-technical sense but not in a moral-political sense.

This discussion on the nature of discourse and the expediency of theoretical engagements has important ramifications for the question of whether the qualification of this equivalence as "political" is legitimate. Thus far, we have proceeded under the assumption that such a characterization is acceptable, as the setting itself clearly falls within the confines of what would commonsensically be accepted as political. The question remains, however, to what extent DT's notion of the political as a contingent arrangement of signifiers is consistent with MCA's ethnomethodological pedigree. Glynos and Howarth's (2007) attempt to explicate DT's methodological foundations allows us to address this issue in greater depth.

3. Glynos and Howarth's logics-based approach

Glynos and Howarth propose to cure the methodological deficit afflicting DT by complementing Laclau and Mouffe's logic of equivalence with two other "logics of critical explanation". Their version of DT thus distinguishes three forms of logic. *Social logics* "characterize the overall pattern of coherence of a discursive practice" (2007: 139) and consist of the practice- and context-specific rules required to describe and characterize these patterns. They are the most basic of the three and capture very general qualities of discursive formations that go largely uncontested. The processes by which these social practices are instituted (transformed, contested, etc.) are informed by *political logics* understood as signifying operations by which social antagonisms are established (Laclau and Mouffe's logic of equivalence) or dismantled (the logic of difference).[3] The notion of *fantasmatic logic* reflects the assumption (e.g., in Laclau's introduction to Žižek 1989) of a supplementary form of radical contingency adopted from Lacanian psychoanalysis. This third type of logic involved in critical explanation refers to the unspoken image of "wholeness" projected by a discourse that provides subjects the impetus to identify with it in response to the structural *constitutive failure* of the identity positions formulated in that discourse (e.g., through a logic of equivalence). Subjectivity, for Lacan, refers not to a particular discursively constructed "position" but arises out of the structural incapacity of the subject to fully "coincide" with the discursive positions it associates itself with. It is thus the product of the

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[3] This companion to the logic of equivalence, not addressed for reasons of brevity, refers to the process of deconstructing hegemonies by articulating their constitutive elements as part of a system of differences. By "[displacing] the frontier of antagonism to the periphery of the social" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 130), it entails a strong "simplification of political space" (ibid.).

subject's confrontation with its own indeterminacy and with the radical contingency of identity and social relationships (2007: 129ff). The task of these fantasmatic logics, then, is to "hook the subject" (p. 130) to the discourse in place by providing a form of closure: They "fill up" the void at the subject's center and conceal the contingency of the prevailing web of social relationships it is discursively confronted with, either through suggesting the imminence of full identification or through conjuring obstacles that accountably prevent the subject from attaining wholeness. These three logics become interconnected in articulated social practice. Problematizing a social practice is achieved by invoking a political logic that asserts an alternative hegemonic project but also presupposes the incorporation of other social logics that remain unchallenged. Fantasmatic logics are also indispensible in this process, as they make the new discursive articulation "stick" by luring the subject into associating oneself with it.

For Glynos and Howarth, these three logics are theoretical constructs that form a vital component of their attempt to make explicit how DT's theoretical framework relates to actual DT research practice. To determine these logics' methodological significance, we should first examine how they relate to the framework's ontological presuppositions (2007: 108ff). DT's ontological point of departure is the unstable, radically contingent character of social relationships, which always oscillate along two cross-cutting axes. The first axis consists of a continuum that has the *social* and the *political* as its two extremes. The social quality of a relationship can be said to predominate if that relation has acquired a "sedimented" character (p. 116), in the sense that subjects are fully absorbed in the practice through which the relationship is constituted and its contingency goes unregistered. Political relationships, in contrast, are those structurings of the social field that are articulated through the public contestation of such a sedimented social relationship. This contestation "[reactivates] the contingent moment of [its] foundation, thus disclosing the potential for different constructions" (ibid.), some of which may in turn acquire a hegemonic character. A relationship qualifies as political, it follows, not because it belongs to a specific domain or topographically delineated "area" of specialized activities and/or institutions (involving governments, parliaments, political parties, elections, etc.), but because it is articulated in the context of a struggle over the institution of the social. The second ontological axis crosscuts the social-political axis and refers to the extent to which relationships recognize their own contingency. If a relationship is explicit concerning the accidental, non-compulsory character of the structuring of the social field it imposes, it qualifies as *ethical*. If, to the contrary, it conceals its own transience and presents that structuring in a reified, essentialist fashion, it must be characterized as *ideological*. This second axis demarcates what Lacan identifies as the territory of *fantasy* (hence *fantasmatic* logics), to be understood as the imagery by which subjects (mis)represent their relationship to a discourse and the identity positions formulated therein.

The analytical role of the three logics can now be specified with greater precision. According to Glynos and Howarth, critical explorations of the social world must always be grounded in empirical accounts of the concrete practices and self-interpretations of the actors whose life-world is investigated. Yet, these self-interpretations are only a point of departure. To engage in critical inquiry, the analyst must surpass this strictly hermeneutical level and establish a connection between these self-interpretations and the theory's ontological presuppositions. The task of the three logics consists of precisely this act. They must be understood as formal analytical constructs borrowed from distinct traditions and situated at different levels of

abstraction that enable the analyst to *articulate a connection* between the empirical and the theoretical realms. Logics are thus second-order concepts: They "offer us an ontologically informed grammar with which to conduct our empirical investigations" (161) and are therefore situated at a different level than the situated self-interpretations that they are supposed to clarify. Logics are, however, also modified in the course of the articulatory process. The idea that analysis itself constitutes a two-way articulation is essential for Glynos and Howarth to avoid the pitfalls of both "top-down" theoreticism and "bottom-up" empiricism.

Here, we discovered a first source of conflict between the two traditions. For MCA, this leap from self-interpretation by the participants to "theoretical" formal-analytical second-order explanations by the analyst and to ontological theorizing is totally unacceptable. Adhering to Sacks' principle of "unmotivated looking" (and thus refusing to posit research goals in advance, cf. Sacks 1984), MCA radically embraces the ethnomethodological policy of explicating the "incarnate intelligibility" of practice (Garfinkel 1967). The latter incrementally discloses itself to analysts, as a side effect of the requirement that participants to an encounter must continually make sure that their conduct is understandable for the other parties involved. From this perspective, explaining action in terms of second-order concepts directs analysis away from what it ought to be concerned with. Substituting his own theory of social phenomena for the participants' understandings of them (an "ironical" move, cf. Watson 1994), the analyst runs the risk of "losing the phenomenon" (Maynard 2003) that he aims to investigate.

Fortunately, the three types of logic are not equally "theoretical" in nature. Social logics, for example, are still firmly tied to the practices they organize - almost in an ethnomethodological sense, as "their identity is virtually co-terminous with the social practices and contexts they make possible" (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 153). Political and fantasmatic logics, in contrast, are more remote from the actors' self-interpretations. They are strongly rooted in DT's ontological framework and can therefore "[be specified] with some precision independently of the fields of meaning within which they operate" (ibid.). The consequences of this internal variation qua ontological status are described below. Section 3.1 argues that because of the distinctly ethnomethodological flavor of this DT concept, MCA can significantly contribute to "opening up" the notion of social logic. MCA extends the analysis of social logics firmly into the domain of "knowing how" by channeling attention to "embodied" self-interpretations of social activity that are not explicitly raised in locutional terms. Once we move on to political and fantasmatic logics, however, the abstract and formal-constructional character of these analytical constructs takes its toll and incommensurabilities between the two frameworks become apparent. Because the last two types of logic transcend the perimeter of what is locally self-explicating to the participants, their operation cannot be reconstructed on the basis of the analysis of individual cases. This predicament is felt most acutely in the case of fantasmatic logics (cf. 3.2 below). Equally problematic is the troublesome relationship of these analytical logics to the everyday understandings of the phenomena under investigation entertained by the participants themselves. This second quandary is less pertinent in the case of fantasmatic logics, as its corresponding ontological axis draws inspiration from psychoanalytic theory and therefore has few correlates in lay experience. The issue is all the more pressing, however, for political logics, in which DT sets up an alternative "ontological" conception of politics in direct

competition with how the participants themselves "practically" conceive of it in their daily lives (cf. 3.3 below).

3.1. *Explicating social logics*

To begin, let us briefly return to the television broadcast discussed in the previous section. Recall that the attorney structured his account of the foundering negotiations over the formation of a new federal government using a categorization device that lumped together political parties on ethnolinguistic grounds instead of on the basis of ideological affinity. This pattern of thinking and talking about language, community and political identity is institutionally inscribed in the regulatory framework dividing the federal state into its constitutive sub-entities. It is therefore nearly universally accepted by actors across the political spectrum. As such, it approximates what Glynos and Howarth refer to as a social logic. As indicated, MCA has no problem explicating such instances of practical reasoning that are deeply entrenched in social practice. Its scope is not restricted, however, to the practical reasoning in *locutional* categorization work (i.e., identities that are "talked about", as in the case at hand). Instead, MCA is able to elucidate the role that *embodied* categorizations play in the organization of everyday practice: Identities that are not "talked about" but enacted in and through discursive form.

Embodied categorization work plays a crucial part in the organization of talk itself, as participating in an encounter on many occasions requires fashioning oneself as a particular "kind" of person. In addition, the interactional format of the talk (e.g. a telephone call) may itself demand that participants adopt particular *activity-specific* identity categories that are reflexively related to (and hence "bring about") the format in question (such as, e.g., [caller] and [call-taker], see Watson 1994, Watson 1997). The investigation of embodied categorization work is, for obvious reasons, all the more pertinent in those encounters where such a verbal component is absent and where no talk is required for rendering one's conduct meaningful. Watson's (1994) analysis of people queuing in supermarkets, for example, illustrates that such non-verbal instances of sociality exhibit a high degree of internal orderliness and are therefore amenable to categorization analysis as well. By participating in a queue, participants assume "turn-generated" identity categories that are reflexively tied to the position they occupy in that queue (such as [head], [tail], etc.), each of which comes with its own category-bound rights and obligations.[4] The participants behaviorally orient to these categories (and associated obligations) in fashioning their conduct and treat them as "belonging together" in the same device (which means, e.g., that identifying someone as [head] is sufficient to treat other people lining up as co-members of that queue). These turn-generated categories, together with this "enacted" internal ordering, are on their own sufficient for establishing the queue as a recognizable phenomenon. As a rule, people lining up before the cashier will organize their queuing without paying attention to the "external" identity categories ([mother], [doctor], [city-dweller], etc.) of their co-participants. In this sense, the process of rendering the queue visible through enacting

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[4] The [second in line], for example, is expected to monitor the interaction between the [head] and the cashier to determine where exactly he or she is to take over the role of [head].

the required ordering of turn-generated categories thus constitutes a context *in its own right.*

Of specific concern to us is the question of how these identity categories embodied in discursive form relate to locutional categorizations, as the discursive coarticulation of these two planes offers extensive opportunities for the problematization of social logics and for instigating skirmishes over alternative ways to organize social practice. Consider the following newspaper extract, which recounts how a gay couple was refused entrance to a dance class:

(2) DANCE SCHOOL REFUSES HOMOSEXUAL COUPLE
((town)) – A homosexual couple from ((town)) is pressing charges against ((dance school)), which refused to enroll them for a dance class. "Everybody is welcome here. But in group classes gentlemen dance with ladies, and not otherwise", the school reacts. […]
"This has nothing to do with discrimination", ((owner)) of the dance school reacts. We do not refuse homosexuals or lesbians. Homosexuals can without problems enroll for courses for singles, on the condition that they are prepared to dance with a female partner. But I am prepared to teach them as a couple in private."
According to ((owner)) a majority of his clientele would object to the presence of a homosexual couple on the dance floor.
"For some dances partners are exchanged. Heterosexual men would thus occasionally also have to dance with a homosexual man, instead of with a female dance partner. Believe me, most Flemish men are not yet prepared for this."
For the ((victim)) the ((owner))'s argument does not make sense.
"For dances where partners are exchanged, my friend and I would step aside and have a beer instead. Why would we seek to embarrass other dancers?" […] [De Standaard, 16 September 2003, my translation]

This article at once reports on a social logic subjected to problematization and simultaneously contributes to that problematization. MCA can make explicit the practical reasoning though which such problematizations are accomplished (as well as resisted). First of all, let us note that it is perfectly feasible to analyze the activity that spawned the conflict in terms of categories endogenous to the activity's internal organization. As a collaboratively accomplished project, dancing requires participants, usually two, to coordinate their conduct in terms of the "turn-generated" categories of [leader] and [follower]. The participants demonstrate their orientation to these categories by making a selection out of a restricted range of permissible moves, a process that is sequentially organized (in the sense that an initial move by the [leader] implicates a response from the [follower]) and subject to specific type-restrictions (in the sense that the [leader]'s initial move strongly curtails the range of possible responses). By structuring their participation in this way, the dancers reflexively "enact" a turn-generated category pair that serves as a source for imputing certain category-bound rights and obligations for as long as the dancing lasts (usually at least one unit of music). The [leader], for example, has the right to initiate a joint move but also assumes the responsibility of ensuring that the [follower] has sufficient "floor" for successfully completing the projected response. By orienting to these "endogenous" categorizations, the activity of two dance partners is rendered recognizable as an instance of dancing.

This endogenous context of activity-specific categorizations is not mentioned as such in the report. However, it plays a crucial role in the background, as the incident

revolves around the "mapability" of the gender-based category pair [[[man],[woman]]] onto the endogenous pair [[[leader],[follower]]]. The presumption that these two category pairs stand in an unequivocal one-to-one relationship to one another becomes evident in the act of breaching it, as swapping partners with a member of a same-sex couple only constitutes a problem if dancing couples are organized on a cross-sex basis by default. Prior to its problematization, however, this mapping was uncritically accepted by all participants in the practice. Therefore, it represents an instance of what Glynos and Howarth refer to as social logic. The inferential mapping of endogenous and external categorizations is not unique to this particular form of activity. Conversation-analytic treatments of institutional interaction (e.g., Wilson 1991; Zimmerman 1998) regularly explain the distinctive character of talk in institutional settings in terms of the participants' contingent calibration of two distinct layers of identity as being in accordance with one another, viz. the interactional alignments that unfold in situated courses of action vs. the recognizable situations established through them (e.g., an [emergency helpline call-taker] interacting with a [member of the public]). It is assumed that until proof to the contrary emerges, the situational identities presumed to be in place warrant emerging interactional alignments associated with those identities and vice-versa. Importantly, the sudden emergence of an interactional alignment that contradicts a situated identity hitherto considered valid may be consequential for the encounter's further development (e.g., by occasioning a reanalysis of the situation as "non-institutional"). However, it does not in itself invalidate the accountability framework on which such expectations are founded. The case under analysis differs in this respect. The case of a [man] attempting to enter a dance class with another [man] as his dance partner demonstrates that such social logics *can* be dismantled.

The process of denaturalizing and rendering contingent this social logic is not carried through to its extreme, however. The origin of the conflict is indeed explicated in terms of the violation of a deeply entrenched organizational feature of the practice in question ("gentlemen dance with ladies, and not otherwise", in the owner's words). However, this social logic is in turn rationalized in terms of a hetero-normative taboo on close bodily interaction among members of the same sex. In the fifth paragraph, the owner defends his school's refusal of gay couples by describing male followers in terms of an additional layer of external identity categories, drawing attention to the dancers' sexual orientation. If gay couples were allowed to participate in the dance class, so it is argued, leaders, now referred to as [heterosexual men], would occasionally have to dance with followers whose most salient feature (at least, in the context of this particular report) is the fact that they are [homosexual men].[5] According to the owner, the majority of these [heterosexual men] "are not yet prepared for this", presumably because they might be afraid that participating in such a constellation would permit onlookers to infer that they are [homosexual] as well.[6] Importantly, the gay couple tacitly accepts the owner's excuse. By insisting that they would voluntarily step aside if

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[5] In most dance classes, participants are expected to exchange partners, as it enhances one's capacity to lead and follow.

[6] The dance school owner's account does not specify the exact categorizational grounds for the implied recategorization: The fact that one is dancing with a same-sex partner or with a same-sex partner who happens to be [homosexual]. This indeterminacy does not pose a practical problem, however, as the two categorizations are, in the context of this particular practice, closely intertwined: The only conceivable reason for which a man would take up the position of follower is if he were a member of a same-sex couple.

the situation called for it (allegedly, "[not to] embarrass other dancers"), they consent to the notion that other men regard the rearticulation of the practice they propose as a threat to their sexual orientation. Their petition to be allowed to enter the dance class thus remains ambiguous. The new articulation of the social practice of dancing that the couple struggles to have accepted challenges the current social logic, but their argument for doing so is not based on a radical deconstruction of that logic but rather on a "right of entrance" for gay couples. Although the rearticulation they propose constitutes a de facto demonstration of the contingency of the taken-for-granted mapping of the external gender-based pair onto the endogenous activity-based pair, the account they offer in support of that rearticulation does not challenge the hetero-normative rationale behind the existing social logic.

The analytical enterprise taken up here appears to be mutually beneficial for MCA and DT. Whereas MCA draws attention to the fact that embodied categorizations often play a significant role in the organization of social practices, DT reminds MCA that these practices may also be subject to dismantling and that their contingent character is vulnerable to exposure.

3.2. *The vanishing of the fantasmatic*

Let us return to the attorney's account of the staggering Belgian government formation. In the previous section, we noted that his discourse incorporated a social logic that aggregates political parties on the basis of their ethnolinguistic affiliation. This logic operates asymmetrically, however, and a disparity is projected between the two groupings over the extent to which their ethno-political unity is "sedimented". For the French-speaking parties, unification on the basis of language is presented as a natural fact (i.e., as fully *socialized*). On the Flemish side, however, it is the object of a *political* logic, as constructed through an equivalence chain that establishes a connection between the signifiers "Flemish" and "nationalist". Ethno-political unity appears here as a project still underway. This analysis still leaves us wondering, however, why and how this project comes to hold sway over its subjects. To answer these questions, a DT analysis must cross the threshold of the fantasmatic, drawing attention to the tacit promise of wholeness and fulfillment that the projected ethno-political unity entails.

At this point in our analysis, we should take a fresh look at the distinction between "true" and "false" Flemish. At the "political" level, the singling out of "false" Flemish plays a crucial part in policing the proposed equivalence chain, as it accounts for the existence of Flemish subjects for whom the chain does not hold. At the fantasmatic level, however, drawing such a distinction between "true" and "false" reveals the existence of an obstacle threatening the realization of the imminent "wholeness" projected by the chain. It suggests that the anticipated enjoyment of ethno-political unity is jeopardized, not so much by the French-speaking politicians who refuse to cede to Flemish demands but by a Flemish "fifth column" that objects to Flemish nationalism. Once these internal opponents are "eliminated" (through the ballot, we may presume), fulfillment is within reach. This underlying fantasy of symbolic purification conceals the structural vacuity of the identity positions formulated in nationalist discourse.

MCA, and with it ethnomethodology as a whole, remains reticent about the fantasmatic implications of the practical reasoning it investigates. Venturing onto this hitherto uncharted terrain would compel MCA to engage in "premature theorizing", as this third type of logic is entirely predicated upon a formal-theoretical account of subjectivity (as the "byproduct" of an ontological structure of desire): No longer coincident with the subject's self-interpretations (as is the case with social logics), fantasmatic logics can only be analytically specified with respect to the framework's ontological presuppositions.

Equally problematic, from an MCA perspective, is that the analytical specification of these formal constructs also requires a consideration of distributional regularities. In the case under analysis, for example, the "non-representative" character of the attorney's statements illustrates the relevance of assessments of typicality for understanding a discourse's fantasmatic qualities. This last point requires more ethnographic background. The excerpt above is one of the few occasions in which a public figure associated with N-VA uses the self-categorization of [true Flemish] in public. Despite the party's eagerness to portray itself as expressing the demands of the large majority of the Flemish electorate (while it only received 27% of the vote), N-VA politicians as a rule conspicuously avoid referring to themselves as the sole true representatives of the people (just as they explicitly renounce all narratives of ethnic purity and fulfillment).[7] It is not coincidental that it is Van Aelst who breaks this taboo. The attorney occupies a marginal position at the fringes of official N-VA discourse, and his statements often border on the clownesque.[8] Still, party officials obstinately refuse to reprimand his incendiary language. From a DT perspective, this ambiguity is not accidental. For N-VA, possessing a figure like Van Aelst is attractive precisely because of his "liminal" status as the party's buffoon, which allows him to articulate elements of underlying fantasmatic narratives that exceed the limits of what is politically acceptable. According to Glynos and Howarth, "fantasmatically structured enjoyment [often exhibits] a kind of extreme oscillation between incompatible positions" (2007: 148). The logics that appeal to such enjoyment "typically rely upon narratives which possess features distributed between public-official and unofficial forums" (2007: 147). In this case, the incompatible positions that must be reconciled for enjoyment to be possible are the party's self-proclaimed democratic aspirations on the one hand and the inevitably usurpatory project of translating ethnic identity into a political community on the other.

Such distributional observations and assessments of the prevalence of particular forms of discourse are difficult for MCA to address. Dedicated entirely to deciphering the self-explicating character of particular scenes, it systematically rejects ethnographic or "talk-external" considerations, including notions of representativeness. As long as the

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[7] In April 2011, the youth wing of the Flemish social-democrat party launched an anti-N-VA campaign under the motto *Ik ben een slechte Vlaming* ("I'm a bad Fleming"), openly mocking the party's inclination to monopolize Flemish identity. The chairman of the *Vlaamse Volksbeweging*, a political lobby organization close to the N-VA, responded in the opinion pages of a widely read newspaper that [bad Fleming] is not part of the repertoire of nationalist politicians, arguing that it is a "self-invented insult" concocted by N-VA's left-wing critics (De Standaard, April 13, 2011).

[8] His eccentricity became increasingly apparent in the months following the broadcast, when the attorney's inflammatory comments repeatedly made the headlines. A famous example is his exclamation, *de Walen zullen niet rusten eer de kabeljauw voor de kust in Oostende Frans spreekt!* ("the Francophones will not give in until the cod in Ostend [a fishing port on the Flemish coast] speak French!"), which he made at an N-VA rally in Brussels on May 26, 2011.

unexpected distribution of a practice, its lack of typicality or eccentricity do not impose themselves as interactionally salient in the course of the encounter itself, encounters such as the one analyzed here are considered as valid for exploring the organizational richness of human practice as any other event.

3.3. *Conflicting accounts of the political*

In what preceded, we saw how the properties of everyday reasoning provide language users with the resources necessary for disagreeing with one another (and for resolving such disagreements): Each situated categorization in turn presupposes and/or entails another, and the open-textured character of practical reasoning enables interactants to privilege one particular presupposed or entailed categorization and downplay rival ones. Detailed analyses of how people categorize one another in a given context thus offer the analyst an "empirical snapshot" of the open, contingent and contestable character of meaning. Although MCA does not share DT's theoretical engagement with poststructuralism, it yields a vision on the eventuality of conflicts over signification that is hence not entirely at odds with how DT conceives of political conflicts.

   The question remains, however, of the extent to which it is legitimate to characterize such emerging disagreements over entailed and presupposed categorizations (such as the one in the dispute over the gay couple) as "political" in the first place. DT asserts its right to do so on the basis of a conception of the political derived from the theory's ontological presuppositions, whereas for MCA, such a qualification ought to be grounded exclusively in the participants' self-interpretations. From an MCA perspective, DT's labeling of certain equivalences as "political" is problematic, as it harbors a potential conflict between the "endogenous" understanding of politics entertained by the participants and the "external" account of the political established by the analyst (in competition with the endogenous account). As indicated above, conflicts of this type should, for MCA, always be decided in favor of the participants and how they, in their own terms, make sense of whatever they are doing. Still, this presumed incommensurability does not preclude a mutual exchange between the two traditions, a possibility that will be explored in the remainder of this article.

   Upon first inspection, the antagonism between "external" and "endogenous" accounts of the political appears reminiscent of the controversy between critical analysts' understanding of politics as "potentially all-pervasive" and conventional "topographical" ones (which are presumably also entertained by lay actors). The former regards politics not as a particular institutional realm but as permeating the entire fabric of social relationships. Thus, the *primacy of the political* (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 120 and elsewhere) refers to the fact that social practices are instituted and contested through antagonisms that are built around political logics. (However, as these antagonisms only emerge if the contingent basis of social practices is "reactivated", ontological primacy does not imply that this latent political dimension of practice is necessarily always activated - hence the seemingly self-contradictory characterization "potentially all-pervasive".) Topographical understandings of the political, in contrast, assume a more conventional stance and treat politics as a spatially delineated domain of specialized activities and institutions (involving governments, parliaments, political parties, elections, etc.). At first sight, it appears that such topographical understandings

correspond more closely to how lay actors typically conceive of politics, and as such they would provide the natural input for an "endogenous" ethnomethodological respecification of the phenomenon.

However, despite the initial appeal of this putative correspondence between the perspective from which social practices are analyzed and the way politics is conceptualized, insisting on the necessity of an "endogenous" account does not necessarily always have to be inconsistent with a "potentially all-pervasive" understanding of the political. A cursory review of the literature reveals that at least some ethnomethodologists embrace a notion of politics as centering around the problematization of contingency that strongly resonates with the one to which critical analysts adhere. For Jayyusi (1995), for example, the "grammar for multiplicity" found in the formal properties of everyday language use yields the possibility of an everyday (or "ordinary") politico-moral practice, where normative judgment is not part of a totalizing grand narrative but constitutes "a situated move within practical life" (1995: 84). Here, politics stands for an unspecified variety of contextually embedded contingent forms of argument and judgment, which may coincide with topographical politics in the narrow sense but must not necessarily do so. Suchman (1994), too, is adamant that categories "have politics". As an example, she quotes Sacks' (1979) analysis of "hotrodder" as a "revolutionary" category, which

> draws our attention to the ways in which categorization devices are devices of social control involving contests between others' claims to the territories inhabited by persons or activities and their own, internally administered forms of organization. In the case of hotrodders, the move is to develop indigenous categories through which kids are able to claim back ownership of their social identities from the adult world that would claim knowledge of them. (Suchman 1994: 188)

The establishment of an alternative, self-administered categorization system constitutes therefore a political move in spite of the fact that it involves a domain of experience that bears little resemblance to how politics is conventionally understood in laymen's terms.

Other ethnomethodologists assume a more austere stance. For Dupret and Ferrié, politics is "a conceptual activity, in the sense of Winch [1958]; it only exists to the extent that one thinks that one is doing it" (2010: 1165, my translation). Hence, the qualification of something as political "is only possible if one adopts the standpoint of local criteria for identification, i.e., those entertained by the persons implicated in a course of action, and not from the viewpoint of professionals, who tend […] to employ criteria drawn from their own activities" (ibid.). Contrary to what one may be tempted to think, such a radically praxeological stance does not automatically rank these authors among those who advocate a conventional topographical understanding of politics. Rather, their point is that critical, potentially all-pervasive (like Glynos and Howarth's) and conventional topographical notions are both based on the false assumption that politics can be studied independently of the local actors' preconceptions about the nature of the activity in which they are engaged (ibid.). Topographical and all-pervasive notions of politics are thus not contradictory for them, but both should be approached as practical accomplishments.

It could be argued, on the basis of Dupret and Ferrié's remarks, that notions of politics centering around the problematization of contingency proposed by ethnomethodologists such as Jayyusi and Suchman can from a Winchian perspective only validly qualify as "political" if they are complemented with an empirically

demonstrable element of reflexivity: Participants must display, in the public details of their conduct, that they indeed understand their performance of a differential stance to be of a "political" nature. One logically inevitable upshot of this position is that what counts as political can never be settled for once and for all and may occasionally itself become a source of conflict. The boundaries of the political, it follows, are thus drawn and redrawn in interaction itself - a conclusion that is remarkably consistent with Glynos and Howarth's understanding of the political as "potentially all-pervasive", but without recognizing its ontological primacy.

Let us attempt to empirically substantiate this point. Compare the following two incidents, both of which took place in a Belgian criminal courtroom:

(3) A young man of Mediterranean origin was arrested during a police intervention in the parking lot of a disco and charged with assault, battery and resisting arrest. In her initial interrogation of the defendant, the judge poses the standard (not guilt-implicative) opening question whether he knows what he is accused of. The defendant answers negatively. He adds that someone unfamiliar to him threw an empty beer bottle at his head for no reason and that he is a victim instead of a perpetrator. Both his verbal behavior and body language communicate impatience and frustration. The judge confronts him with witness statements contradicting his version of the events. The defendant responds that the police refused to interrogate friends who wanted to testify on his behalf. The judge cuts him short noting that he is known as a hooligan and that his demeanor is arrogant and provocative. She concludes: "That's no way to behave!" [edited fieldnotes, abbreviated][9]

(4) Just before closing the session, when the courtroom has almost entirely emptied, the judge pronounces the verdict in the case of five young anarchists, arrested on the eve of a large anti-globalization rally on the charge of spraying slogans on a large canvas protecting a construction site in the town center. The hearing itself took place two weeks earlier. The defendants are not represented by an attorney. When the court clerk summons the five to come forward, three instantly sit down on the bench while two others remain standing. The judge summons them to stand up. The ones who were seated rise, while the two who were standing mockingly sit down. In the meantime, the court clerk approaches a sympathizer in the back of the courtroom and politely urges him to put down his beret. The latter asks if this is obligatory. When the clerk answers affirmatively, he abruptly turns around and leaves. The judge begins to read the verdict, which is actually not unfavorable for the defendants. He confirms their democratic right to express their discontent but insists that they must do so in a democratically acceptable manner, without inflicting damage to others' property. As the defendants refuse the favor of "suspension of the sentencing" (which is itself a provocative move), the judge states that he has no alternative but to sentence them to the minimum sentence.[10] The building company's damage claim (which amounted to thousands of euros), however, is in its entirety rejected as excessive and unsubstantiated. The very moment that the judge finishes reading the sentence, the five turn around and walk out

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[9] A more elaborate description of the incident can be found in D'hondt (2009: 822).

[10] Suspension of the *sentencing* is not to be confounded with a suspended *sentence*. Belgian criminal law provides the judge the option of (literally) "suspending the sentencing" of a first time offender, which means that the court finds the defendant guilty but does not pronounce a sentence on the condition that no further offenses are committed within a set term. Unlike suspended *sentences*, these suspended *sentencings* are not entered into the defendant's criminal record.

without according him a look. The latter, visibly frustrated, calls out that "had it been another judge, you would have had a much harsher time". [edited fieldnotes]

Both incidents contain evidence of a deliberate violation by the defendants of a deeply entrenched organizational feature of courtroom practice, non-observance of which greatly hypothecates the remainder of the exchange: They refuse to treat the judge adjudicating their case as an impartial truth-finder. In the first incident, this refusal is communicated by the defendant's claim "not to know what he is accused of", an overt display of non-cooperation issued in response to the deliberately neutral, ostensibly not guilt-implicative opening question by the judge. In the second incident, it is implicit in the defendants' slapstick-like attempts to make a vaudeville of courtroom etiquette.

There are, however, major differences between the two cases with respect to the impact of this violation. In the first incident, the defendant's courtroom conduct is constructed as illustrative of a personal deficiency. After a few seconds, the judge abruptly terminates her interrogation of the defendant by categorizing him as a [hooligan], an interactional move warranted not only by the nature of the facts for which the latter is tried but also by the interactional stance he adopts towards her. This recategorization of the defendant only takes into consideration the *formal* aspects of his conduct and completely ignores the *content* of what he is trying to communicate. Elsewhere (D'hondt 2009), I argue that the defendant's refusal to comply with institutionally imposed interactional requirements and this "token reduction" (which privileges form over content) that the judge subsequently subjects him to are a result of the legal system's structural failure to take into consideration defendants' self-categorizations as [minority members] who are allegedly subjected to unfair treatment.[11] From a magistrate's perspective, metacommunication involving such a self-categorization is unacceptable, as it would situate court proceedings in a context of group relations and contradict the judiciary's self-representation as not co-substantial with any social body in particular. For a defendant with a minority background, however, such a failure is likely to come across as yet another confirmation of his discriminatory treatment, which in turn vindicates his ferocious response to the judge's questions. The result is a total deadlock for the defendant: While the judicial setting for structural reasons bars all attempts to open up a space for discussing issues related to identity, his own "behavioral" response to this closure leaves the magistrate no option but to dismiss the "content" of his interactional conduct as irrelevant.

The second case differs in this respect. Here, the defendants' implicitly communicated rejection is not treated as indexing the personality that induced them to commit the facts for which they are being tried (spraying slogans on the canvas covering a construction site) but rather as indicating the political vision expressed by these acts. Importantly, the consistency between the defendants' courtroom stance and the content of the accusation is in this case not articulated by the magistrate presiding over the court but is entirely brought about by the defendants themselves. That the latter managed to impose a "political" re-analysis of the role of the judge and of the courtroom setup (as, for example, [proxy of the bourgeois state and its repressive apparatus]) is evident from the judge's frustrated outburst after reading the verdict, when the five defendants silently walked out of the courtroom without acknowledging

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[11] Several comparable cases are discussed in D'hondt (2009).

the leniency of the verdict. The judge's acrimonious display of frustration with the defendants' refusal to show appreciation of his generosity clearly hints at the existence of international differentiation among the judiciary with respect to how such marginal political groups should be dealt with. As such, it indicates traces of a "political" self-awareness on the judge's part (who is known as an outspoken liberal). In this sense, the defendants were successful in forcing a "political" analysis onto a setting that is otherwise highly resilient to such a portrayal. In so doing, they temporarily redrew the boundaries of what may be considered political.

All of the evidence thus suggests that these five anarchists' overt display of insolence constituted a politically loaded act and that they were, in a self-reflective way, "making a political statement". Still, the impact of that public stance was, in this instance, obviously limited. In Glynos and Howarth's conceptual framework, these activists could be said to have temporarily opened up a field of possibility, but they never asserted an alternative hegemony or proposed a rival equivalence chain.

Importantly, this publicly displayed reflexive awareness of the political nature of one's interactional conduct (and, by extension, of the disputable nature of the political) is itself a deeply local phenomenon. This basic understanding that understanding one's practical circumstances as "political" is always a local accomplishment is one key element that is missing in Dingwall's (2000) argument that ethnomethodology encapsulates an essentially conservative normative position. Tracing its intellectual ancestry to the Austrian school of economics (with Schütz acting as a go-between), Dingwall contends that Hayek indirectly exerted a strong intellectual influence on Garfinkel and his associates. Hayek was among the first to recognize the centrality of order as

> the unintended consequence of human agents using the local knowledge available to them to pursue their interests within a framework of very general rules of proper conduct, like the features of practical reasoning identified as ethno-methodology. Knowledge is imperfect, fragmented, and local. No one knows the outcome of any particular action or its impact on aggregate outcomes. Nevertheless, as long as every-one adheres to the rules of proper conduct, the pursuit of self-interest will produce an order that is maximally beneficial to all participants. (Dingwall 2000: 908)

Ethnomethodology's findings, Dingwall concludes, thus supply strong backing for Adam Smith's claim that

> a spontaneous liberal order [rests] on the moral action of individuals. Self-interest [is] maximized by self-restraint. If we are concerned about various kind of oppression and injustice, then much more may be achieved by a focus on our individual responsibilities to deal properly with each other rather than by directive measures directed at sweeping changes. (2000: 909)

One problem with Dingwall's conservatism is that the context-transcendent rationality of moderation on which it is founded posits a contemplating subject lurking behind everyday practice. Ethnomethodology is supposed to teach this contemplating subject about which political positions are normatively acceptable and which are not. Both assumptions are fundamentally at odds with Jayyusi's ethnomethodological respecification of social critique as a locally constituted form of action that is the

product of specific historical and contextual circumstances. If ethnomethodology is critical of Lacanian psychoanalysis, it must also reject the naive humanism behind Dingwall's liberal conservatism.

4. Conclusion

It is safe to conclude that ethnomethodologically inspired analyses of the context-specific ways in which lay actors categorize one another hold great promise in rendering the abstract, theoretically founded notion of "equivalence" empirically tangible. In addition to delivering detailed accounts of the ways that equivalences between identity categories are brought about as part of our everyday practices of situated practical reasoning, MCA also provides a template for extending the analysis of these equivalences into the domain of "knowing how" (by putting the analysis of embodied and locutional identity categories on an equal footing). Moreover, MCA's treatment of categorization as a situated activity, rather than as a stable, pre-existent cognitive structure, makes this approach equally apposite for reconstructing the local dismantling of categorial orders as for tracing how they are set up. However, the match between these two traditions is nevertheless far from perfect. We saw that the coarticulation of MCA's radically empirical stance with DT's poststructuralist theoretical framework is made possible by the former's profound sensitivity to the locally accomplished character of categorization work, the open-texturedness of membership categories and the way they are reflexively embedded in their context of occurrence. Curiously, the very same empiricism that locks MCA practitioners' analytical attention onto the contingent nature of practice is also responsible for its staunch refusal to take up theoretical engagements. Thus, categorization analysis consistently falters - and willingly so - at the point where DT would articulate equivalences between identity categories, and other aspects of practical reasoning which MCA so brilliantly brings to the fore, as part of a "logic of critical explanation." The reason for this is that MCA rejects the ontological presuppositions that these formal-analytical DT constructs propose. The articulation of fantasmatic logics is additionally complicated by the fact that they press analysis beyond the perimeter of what is locally available. In this way, the analyst is forced to evaluate the local production of meaning not only in terms of "external" theoretical assumptions (which is problematic in its own right), but also on the basis of distributional information and of things that were said and done on other, remote occasions (which, again, requires "external" ethnographic knowledge).

This refusal to take up theoretical engagements should not be taken to mean, however, that MCA (or ethnomethodology as a whole) commits the fallacy that Torfing (2005) attributes to the "first generation" of discourse analysts (under whose title he sweeps together distributional sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, early discursive psychology and the East-Anglia variety of critical linguistics): A presumed incapacity to "link the analysis of discourse with the analysis of politics and power struggles" (p.6). The last section demonstrated that, at least for MCA, this assertion is not necessarily true. Rather, the boundaries of the political are drawn and redrawn in interaction itself, thus allowing situated discursive practice to develop a "reflexive" quality that unexpectedly approximates DT's potentially all-pervasive understanding of the political as the contingent problematization of a social practice. In drawing attention to this often ignored conception of the political that is latent within the ethnomethodological

tradition itself, then, the selective coarticulation of MCA and DT pursued in this article may indeed turn out beneficial to both parties to this dialogue.

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