

LACLAU and Mouffe's Theory of Discourse

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ABSTRACT: Although the discourse theory has been introduced recently, it has generalized in many social science disciplines. LACLAU and Mouffe's discourse analysis is one of these new ideas whose extension of the semantic theory consists of a set of interrelated concepts, which can create a systematic structure. It is also possible to achieve interpretation and analysis of the socio-political phenomena performance and increase the forecasting, prediction and evolution capacities in communities. Discourse analysis in terms of semantic theory stems from the Saussurian structural linguistics and is in accordance with the social theory. It is a combinatorial theory that is rooted in the ideas of people like Derrida, Foucault, Marx, and Gramsci.

Keywords: theory, linguistics, articulation, discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Discourse analysis is a new method to estimate social phenomena and relationships that has been particularly noticeable for researchers during the recent decades. This theory considers a central role for understanding of social phenomena and relationships and the way in which they change within the political processes of conflicts between the forces of otherness for the formation of social meaning. Although discourse analysis, as a theory and a methodology of estimation of social events, is a relatively new phenomenon, this relatively short time has led to its growing expansion in different areas of the social sciences.

Discourse Theory and History of its Formation

By introducing the linguistic structures, Swiss linguist, Saussure, made the first impressions in developing a theory of discourse. Hence, it can be said that discourse theories that have been shaped in different areas of social sciences, have had their roots in the ideas of Saussure on linguistics. These theories have gradually evolved and entered the social sciences. The main concern in this discourse theory is people's ideas and perception of themselves in communities. In other words, how do people define themselves in different societies and consequently, what are their behavioral patterns? For example, knowing someone who lives under an authoritarian government is quite different from knowing someone who lives in a democratic state and believes in freedom and equality of humans; therefore, their behavioral patterns will have substantial differences. (Kasraei and Shiraz, 340: 2009).

People's view about the world is a product of discourses. This theory does not negate the presence of fact, but it believes that objects and phenomena can be meaningful just through the valve of hegemonic discourse on society, and become understandable. For example, river flooding is an event independent of thinking and minds of people; meanwhile, from the time when people start to consider meaning for it, it changes into a discourse. Based on these different discourses, people attribute it to God's wrath, governmental mismanagement, dam failure and the like. Thus, according to these discourses, this event is interpreted quite differently. At the same time, discourse domain is not just limited to syntax. In fact, each of them requires a series of specific actions required to follow certain social consequences.

Thus, in the above example that is based on a discourse, varied decisions such as building dams, defense of environmental policies, and criticism to the government or reinforcement of piety are made. Therefore, discourses give meaning to facts. Because of this process, the social world takes it meaning and alters. Social identities and relations are also the products of language and its discourses. This change in discourse will lead to change in the social world. Moreover, conflicts of discourses will change and reproduce social realities (Hosseinzadeh, 182: 2004).

Given the above-mentioned ideas, it can be concluded that interpretations derived from the concept and signifier of freedom are affected by hegemonic discourses over society. According to the Islamic-religious discourses governing Iranian society during the formation of the Islamic Revolution, limits of freedom are also defined in terms of these religious concepts whose signifiers might be different from those found in Western societies.

3-4- Concepts and Components of LACLAU and Mouffe's Theory of Political Discourse

Introducing a theory requires explaining its key and constitutional concept. LACLAU and Mouffe have used numerous and sometimes complex, concepts with many different aspects whose understanding their theories and subsequently their application requires knowledge of these concepts. Multitude of concepts in the theory of these two thinkers not only have made it somewhat difficult to understand it, but it also insures the tools available to researchers in order to know inter- and extra-relations of the discursive governing communities and to analyze the various components of the social phenomena. The unique feature of the mentioned concepts is that they are associated with each other in the chain. Understanding each leads us to knowledge of the next concepts. Moreover, some of the basic concepts embrace several other concepts. In fact, these concepts are subsets of the main concepts. This section attempts to specify these categories.

Signifier (sign) and Signified

In LACLAU and Mouffe's theory, the concepts of signifier and signified play a key role signifiers are abstract or real entities, concepts, phrases, and symbols. If they are located in a particular discourse, they will imply some specific meanings. Meaning and implications of a signifier are called signified. A signified is a sign that whenever we see it, we sense the desired signifier. For example, a plurality of the press, political parties, and critical groups is a sign. In other words, a signified leads us to the signifier of "freedom of expression." i.e., it modifies freedom of speech for us.

Central Signifier

A person, symbol, or concept around which other signifiers are collected and articulated is called central signifier. The central signifier is like a perpendicular for a tent as if lifted, the tent collapsed. Discourse is a cohesive galaxy and the top signifier is its core and the gravity of the central core (signifier) absorbs other signs (Khalaji, 54: 2007). For example, in the discourse of freedom in terms of Ayatollah Taleghani, monotheism is the central signifier and other signifiers gain their meaning at its shade. Articulated action occurs in the periphery of the central signifier and concepts learned in the context of Taleghani's discourse find a particular identity.

Floating Signifiers

Sign and concepts in this theory are in form of floating signifiers that different discourses try to make sense of them. Floating signifier is a signifier whose signified is floating (non-fixed). In other words, there are multiple referents and different political groups compete to assign their desired signified. Based on its own syntactic structure, every discourse highlights a signified in consistent with this syntactic system and overrides other signified.

Arbitrary Relationship between Signifier and Signified

Presence of different signifiers for a signified in different languages is due to arbitrary relationship of signifier and signified, because it enables language to bridge our understanding of the outside world. In fact, this language allows us to understand things. Thus, the meaning of the signs will change. Such a view provides a suitable ground for syntactic ambiguity and diversity. There are misunderstandings in everyday life and the use of terms such as freedom, democracy and justice in very different and even conflicting senses, which suggest that, unlike Saussure's view, the relationship between signifier and signified is always subject to change.

Element, Time, and Discourse Domain

Discourse coherence depends on stability of relationship between the signifier and the signified on one hand and stability of the relationship between the signifier and the signified on the other hand. Those signifiers, which are gathered around a central signifier, are called "moment.". Before entering a discursive articulation, a long time is located in the discourse domain and is called an element. These elements are floating signifiers whose meaning is not still fixed and are not included in a discourse. In fact, various discourses try to grant them meaning.

Restlessness

Based on LACLAU and Mouffe's theory, the concept of restlessness refers to those crises and events that have challenged the hegemonic discourses. In other words, no discourse cannot be fully stabilized and maintain its dominance forever.

Hostility and Otherness

Competitors refer to those who do not accept the interpretation and calibration of existing values . However, because of their link with liberal-democratic values, social cohesion is preserved. The most important feature of democracy is reducing animosity of competition. In addition, it emphasizes the role of otherness in the historical development discourses and reduces the violent and destructive face of hostility. In a discourse context, hostility refers to ultimate possibility and randomness of the discourses and other phenomena. If hostility always threatens the presence of a discourse and continuously puts it at risk of collapse, all discourses will be possible and temporary and will not be established at all. Hence, it is always possible that a discourse competes with the dominant discourse and change into a hegemonic discourse.

Logic of Difference, Logic of Equivalence

Otherness leads us to another discourse called "logic of difference" which refers to plurality of society and emphasizes the distinctions and discrepancies between social forces. This logic seeks to focus on differences and variations, and consequently uproot the current differences in the social field and the equivalence chain. Here, hostility and otherness have become outstanding. Equivalence Logic or chain is the logic of simplification of political space. Discourses are constantly trying to hide the existing variants and make a homogeneous society. This is done by creating an equivalence chain. This chain shows that in the process of articulation, original signs (signifiers) are combined with other signs in a syntactic chain and are located in contrast with an other that apparently threatens them.

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Competition

Discourses repeatedly send the other to the margin to highlight themselves, but whatever severe this action may be, it can't eliminate the other from this challenging competition. Therefore, it is always possible to reconstruct and return the oppressed. It is also necessary to note that the otherness includes concepts ranging from competition to hostility and repression, so the relationship between self and other is not always hostile. As far as complete removal is not impossible, generally, it can be said that higher discourse capacities for changing hostility to competition will stabilize their conditions more than ever. The other can be present as a competitor on the scene. It can also prosper the competitive environment and as a "productive outsider" act in creation and formation of identity (Kasraei and Shiraz, 350: 2009).

Hegemony

Hegemony can be defined as the process of meaning production and is considered as an important tool to stabilize power relations. Through production of meaning, relations of power would seem natural and in line with common sense to remain mostly hidden and unquestioned. Hegemony is a kind of political logic that creates a "consensus" and transforms power into reality, and instead of using force, it takes persuasion techniques to apply its dominance.

Deconstruction

"Deconstruct" is one of the concepts of discourse theory whose meaning is understood under the concept of hegemony. Hegemony will make a signifier closer to a specific signified and, leads to (temporary) syntactic stability of that sign and changes it into a floating signifier. However, the aim of deconstruction is to eliminate this stable sense

and to break the hegemony of competing discourses, because breaking the semantic consistency of a dialogue will lead to hegemonic loss of the discourse.

Power

In view of LACLAU and Mouffe, power is defined as the authority to define, of course, enforcing this definition to whatever it negates. Using this power, discourses exclude the other and fix themselves. They try to exert force on each other and win. Since their winning is not predetermined, the essential role in the survival or destruction of the discourses will be determined more than ever.

Accessibility and Reliability of a Discourse

"Accessibility" has two aspects, 1) its literature and concept is a simple and understandable discourse expressed in plain language. 2) This discourse is available to the public opinion in situation where there is no other alternative discourse as a hegemonic competitor in the field of competition.

Position of Subjectivity and Political Subjectivity

The concept of "subjectivity positioning" is related to those situations in which the agents believe themselves within discourses as social activists and the concept of "political subjectivity" is related to the period in which actors act or make decisions. Thus, when the identity formation occurs for the subject, social or economic unrest will result. This turmoil causes the former subjects feel the sense of identity crisis. In such circumstances, subjects are trying to reconstruct their own identity and social meaning by identifying and articulating alternative discourses.

LACLAU and Mouffe's Political Discourse in a Scientific- Theoretical Framework

LACLAU and Mouffe, using Saussure's linguistics, have defined discourse as a set of articulated and articulated signs. Accordingly, discourse is a syntactic galaxy in which words and signs are interconnected to create a meaningful set. In this theory, the concept of discourse includes a broad set ranging from linguistic to non-linguistic data (documents, presentations, notices, policies, institutions, organizations, etc.).

LACLAU and Mouffe have borrowed their discourse concept from of Foucault, but instead of his "sentence," they have used Saussure's "sign" to describe the structure of discourse. Therefore, the LACLAU and Mouffe believe that discourse is not a combination of sentences rather a series of signs. Foucault's concept of "discursive formation" is analogous to the concept of "articulation" in LACLAU and Mouffe's discourse theory. Articulation is a process by which signs are welded to form a semantic system (Dabiri Mehr, 30: 2013).

As in the Saussure's notion the link between sign and meaning is arbitrary and is the result of an agreement or a contract, there is no intrinsic connection between the sign and its meaning, here the signs, and concepts are like floating signifiers that borrow their meanings from different discourses. Each sign can be understood when placed within a discourse to maintain a specific meaning and achieve a syntactic stability, albeit temporary. No sign itself owns a unique identity, but its identity stems from a discourse in which it is located. In this theory, the term "moment" is used to show the sign meaning within a discourse. Moment can be considered as a sign, whose meaning is temporarily stabilized, but it is always floating and it is possible to be attracted and take its meaning via other discourses (Dabiri Mehr, 31: 2013)

LACLAU and Mouffe's signs are mostly organized around a central signifier. This central signifier is a sign that links with other signs to make them sensible. For example, the liberal Democracy in conjunction with signifiers such as free vote, polls, freedom of expression and political participation offers them a special meaning. In other case, in political Islam, there are signifiers as well as concepts such as people, Muslim clerics, and religious democracy, which are defined along with the central concept of velayat-e faqih.

In any political discourse which is formed based on LACLAU and Mouffe's theory, a series of signs are placed along each other in an equivalence chain by which they achieve meaning(it creates an articulation between sign). Therefore, the signs of a discourse get their meanings through links with each other. One of the most important hypotheses in the discourse theory is diversity and inherent disorganization of society. Through the concepts of equivalence chain and logic of difference (otherness), this diversity is described. Thus, in an articulation, the main signs of a semantic chain are combined with other signs and are put against an other that seems to threaten them. This type of arrangement is called the discourse theory of equivalence chain. Discourses overlap these differences through this equivalence chain. Here, elements lose their heterogeneous attributes and conflicting meanings and are solved in a syntax which creates a specific discourse.

It is important to note that the different properties of the various elements and signs in an equivalence equivalence chain can never lead to complete removal of these differences and it is always possible to face the

appearance of difference and diversity and removal of some elements from the equivalence chain. Therefore, the logic of equivalence can be considered as simplifying logic of the political atmosphere.

Logic of differences is one of the concepts inferred from otherness. This logic refers to plurality trait of society and focuses on diversity between the social forces. It attempts to emphasize on distinctions and variants, differences in social domain and consequently, uproots the current equivalence chain. Here, hostility and otherness will become more outstanding. (Dabiri Mehr, 33: 2013).

Conclusion

According to the above- mentioned material presented in this paper, LACLAU and Mouffe's theory of discourse can meet some needs of politics regarding its theoretical framework and generalization. Although based on postmodern theories, discourse theories are somehow relative and they can often explain and analyze current changes of a community life. Moreover, LACLAU and Mouffe's discourse theory can help us to understand future developments based on better understanding of blank signifiers governing the discourses and even enter the domain of futures studies. With this approach, the theory can also be used for the pathology of hegemonic discourses. On theories of political discourse, LACLAU and Mouffe believed that discourse doesn't simply refer to a combination of speech and writing. In fact, these two are considered as the components of the whole discourse. In other words, discourse is defined as a series of linguistic -cognitive and Meta linguistic -cognitive signs and signs, i.e., it includes both physical and theoretical dimensions.

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