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Constructing Hegemony in Global Politics. A Discourse–Theoretical Approach to Policy Analysis

Joscha Wullweber
Universitat Kassel

The article proposes a discourse–theoretical approach to policy analysis that explores how political relations are changed through and within a strategic and interest-led process with a focus on conflictual struggles that attempt to establish, change, or consolidate specific interests and meanings as universalities. It suggests a conceptualization of hegemonic projects and discusses their relation to the common good. After elaborating on the term discourse formation as a middle-range concept and a more concrete approach to hegemony, the article suggests various clusters of (discursive) strategies to facilitate the evaluation of hegemonic processes within a policy field. Lastly, it introduces vectors of hegemony, proposing an analytical grid as a framework to facilitate reflection on hegemony. European austerity policies are examined to illustrate how some logics and strategies work to strengthen a specific governance approach to the euro-zone crisis.

DISCOURSE AND HEGEMONY IN POLICY ANALYSIS

In recent years, there have been several promising approaches to carrying out policy analysis from a critical perspective. Notable examples include critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013), cultural political economy (Jessop, 2010; Sum, 2009), discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2011, 2015), and scholars such as Colin Hay (2002), Maarten Hajer (1995, 2006), and Frank Fischer (2015). Although these approaches differ with respect to their research focus and parts of their ontologies (language vs. practices, critical realism vs. poststructuralism, social structure understood as material relations vs. social structure understood as discursive relations, etc.), they nevertheless share some fundamental ontological and epistemological assumptions. Instead of seeing public policy making as a neutral process in which the various actors try to find the best solutions among existing proposals to solve social, economic, or political problems, critical approaches highlight the conflictual character of these processes. They suggest an understanding of policy processes as struggles to promote and implement some policy approaches as opposed to others. Moreover, many of these approaches focus on semantic aspects in policy making. They address the questions of how certain meanings and imaginaries are produced; why they prevail; and how they resonate with existing hierarchies and power relations (Fischer & Gottweiss, 2012).

The discourse–theoretical framework for administrative policy analysis outlined in this article joins the other critical approaches to policy analysis, but it takes Laclau’s theory of hegemony as its starting point (Laclau, 1990a, 1996a, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).¹ It also draws strongly on Antonio Gramsci (1971). In contrast to other approaches, a discourse–theoretical approach to policy analysis facilitates the investigation of linguistic and nonlinguistic articulations that legitimize some policy measures over others. It stresses the significance of strategic practices in the production of social reality. The analysis of conflictual processes of constructing meaning and truth and attempts to enforce, shift, or repoliticize prevailing policy practices constitute the home domain of the outlined approach. This includes the exploration of efforts to articulate certain policies as being exclusively linked to the common good while excluding alternative policies, as well as strategies that portray certain policies as indispensable and without alternative. In such a discourse–theoretical policy analysis, the category of hegemony is at center stage, accounting for the interplay between consent and force in policy processes.

Howarth and Griggs (Howarth, 2010; Howarth & Griggs, 2012) already outlined first important steps toward such a policy analysis. For the most part, however, their approach remains on an abstract ontological level.² Indeed, there is as yet no proper operationalization³ of Laclau’s theory of hegemony in the field of policy analysis.⁴ The fact that the abstract ontological categories cannot be easily translated into terms that are more concrete makes it difficult for them to be used in this context. As a result, the overall conceptual framework for applying the theory is still underdeveloped. It is the aim of this article to develop further the toolkit for a discourse–theoretical approach to policy analysis. What follows, therefore, is not a new theoretical outline of the concepts hegemony and discourse or the examination of a specific empirical case study, but rather an important step toward operationalizing Laclau’s theory within the context of policy analysis. It is intended as a contribution to the discussion, about the strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches to policy analysis and how to operationalize them (Fairclough, 2013; Howarth, 2010; Jessop, 2010).

Starting with abstract considerations that are developed more concretely in a systematic manner to facilitate operationalization, the article proceeds as follows: The first part outlines the poststructural concept of hegemony. It begins with a discussion of the Gramscian approach to hegemony and his notion of universality. These abstract categories are then operationalized from a poststructural point of view. The article goes on to consider the concept of a hegemonic project and its relation to the common good, framing the overall political structure in the section that follows as a layered discourse formation. After expanding on the idea that in order to become hegemonic, a particular project needs to be related to a common good vis-à-vis a general threat, the article explores the notion of a common good, and explains how such an imaginary universality can become detached from its previous specific content through strategic articulations which entail the construction and modification thereof. It draws attention to the question of strategic articulations, by proposing the possibility of analytically subsuming recurring patterns of articulations under distinct clusters of strategy. Different strategy clusters are exemplified in an examination of how the prevailing governance of the eurozone crisis was linked to austerity policies. Finally, the article proposes different vectors of hegemony in order to assess diverse hegemonic discourse formations.

A POSTSTRUCTURAL CONCEPT OF HEGEMONY

Poststructural hegemony theory holds that the struggle for hegemony is the pivotal feature of every society, and that as an ontological category, hegemony “defines the very terrain in which a political relation is actually constituted” (Laclau, 2000a, p. 44). The theory is rooted in the Gramscian notion that hegemony rests on the ability to universalize the particular interests of a group as a socioeconomic and political structure (Gramsci, 1971, p. 181). According to Gramsci, the ruling group pursues its interests in ways that lead other groups to regard these interests as common or general interests. Seen in this light, hegemony involves active consent and approval on the part of the ruled. Gramsci was already aware of the constructiveness of identities. Inherent in his term *catharsis*—which comes astonishingly close to the concept of governmentality, a word coined later by Foucault—is the understanding that subjects are constructed within hegemonic processes (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 366–367). Accordingly, the struggle for hegemony implies the production of new (collective) identities. What is more, it is also, and sometimes even primarily, a struggle for the hegemonic construction of identities, as Foucault has argued in his various writings. The hegemonic collective will does not confront the subjects in terms of an alienation of their real interests. Hegemony is therefore not so much an external and constraining social structure as it is a productive power relation: “[It] is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 367).

For a discourse-theoretical approach to policy analysis, it is necessary to specify the general notion that hegemony refers to a relation between particularity and universality. A certain particularity, such as a specific policy program to overcome a social or economic problem or crisis, becomes articulated as being a universal solution and a common good to society. Such a universal common good, however, does not exist: “There is always going to be a gap between the content which at some point incarnates society’s aspiration to fullness (the ontic content), and this fullness as such, which has no content of its own (the ontological part)” (Laclau, 2000b, p. 196). It is an imaginary universality that becomes hegemonic. Through strategic articulations, this signifier tends to lose its particularity; it becomes tendentially detached from its previous specific content in order to become the embodiment of fullness—a universality, a common good (Laclau, 2000c, p. 304).⁵ Hegemonic projects always refer, in one way or another, to different common goods, which are translated into policy programs. In other words, only because the universal interest is an empty space—with there being no pre-given universal interest—is it possible to fill that space with hegemonic struggles. During the financial crisis of 2007–2008, for example, the need to bail out banks with billions of tax money was legitimized by reference to the need to preserve the stability of the financial system as a universal interest.

Different actors can seek to promote a hegemonic project and attempt to ensure that their respective interests are inscribed within that project at a privileged stage. For a policy analysis, it is important to take into account all the social, economic, cultural, and other resources that these actors have at their disposal to promote their hegemonic project. In order to understand hegemonic dynamics it is also necessary to analyze the constellation of actors involved. However, although the nature of the resources and group constellation can give some indication of the strengths and weaknesses of the actors, it is ultimately the success of

the articulation strategies that decides whether a hegemonic project will prevail. The concept of hegemony “emphasizes the ways in which power operates to form our everyday understanding of social relations, and to orchestrate the ways in which we consent to (and reproduce) those tacit and covert relations of power” (Butler, 2000, p. 14). This does not mean that certain actors and political groups do not benefit more than others do from a given form of discourse formation. On the contrary, and virtually by definition, a particular hegemony expresses and covers the interests of some actors more than others. However, it is not the actors—the hegemonic forces themselves—that are hegemonic. Rather, it is a certain element of common sense (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 419–425), a worldview, a societal relation, or, more generally, a specific spatiotemporal discourse formation which becomes hegemonic. Finally, hegemony entails coercive measures. It is “protected by an armor of coercion” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 263). As society is based on antagonistic conflicts, hegemony is grafted on coercion. However, the alternatives cannot be completely erased. Traces of these alternatives—the political roots of social relations—remain present, and can become reactivated at some point in future. It follows that every hegemony is only a temporal structuration, even though some forms may continue to exist over a longer period of time.

HEGEMONIC PROJECTS AND DISCOURSE FORMATIONS

A discourse–theoretical approach to policy analysis is based on the assumption that the differentiation between the political and the social (i.e., between those fields that are more fluid and open to debate and those which have become institutionalized) is not permanent or objective. Instead, it is a reflection of hegemonic struggles, which define what must be seen as a political or a general common good. From this, it follows that the social structure of society is not the result of a natural process, but of historically antecedent social struggles: “[P]ower consists of radical acts of institution, which involve the elaboration of political frontiers and the drawing of lines of inclusion and exclusion” (Howarth, 2010, p. 310, emphasis in original). The results of these processes are stratified social, political, and economic structures with different layers of sedimented discourses. The term sedimentation stems from Husserl, and refers to the visibility of the political roots of social actions and meanings. The more a discourse becomes sedimented, the more social meanings and practices become stabilized and taken for granted, and the more difficult it becomes for change to take place. Sedimentation does not happen passively but because of political struggles that seek to universalize particular interests. The policy field, of course, is multidimensional, with crisscrossing interconnections and nodal points between the layers. Moreover, the layers are not completely fixed. Shifts and displacements regularly take place.

A discourse–theoretical approach to policy analysis implies the examination of how social and political relations are changed or consolidated through and within an interest-led process: “If such a structure is dependent upon its enunciation for its continuation, then it is at the site of enunciation that the question of its continuity is to be posed” (Butler, 1997, p. 19). The basic units of analysis are (verbal and nonverbal) articulations. An articulation is understood as a practice that establishes or reifies relations among meaningful elements with shifting meanings as a possible result (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 105). A discourse reflects the sum

of articulations on a particular issue—that is, action and language—shaping the perceptions, thought processes, and practices of individuals. According to this concept of discourse, action and meaning are closely related. A hegemonic articulation is a special form of a political articulation (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 141). In contrast to mere political articulations, hegemonic articulations are expressed in such a way as to imply more than a specific demand or promise. They claim that once the hegemonic demand is fulfilled, an array of other demands will also be fulfilled; or even more, that the fulfillment of the hegemonic demand via different policy programs will lead directly to the common good. Accordingly, hegemonic articulation incorporates a multitude of other political articulations (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 141). Hegemonic strategies construct a discourse or project, or stabilize an already existent hegemonically structured discourse or project (see also Howarth, 2010, p. 310). They are embedded within a wider horizon of truth—stratified discourse formations. Different hegemonic articulations as parts of competing hegemonic projects seek to fill the notion of the common good. Within the context of the eurozone crisis since 2009, austerity is considered to be one of the most important issues (Blyth, 2013). Austerity policies are professed to guarantee the stability of the eurozone and, ultimately, for solving the economic crisis. Specific policies include the fostering of flexible working arrangements (less employment protection, more wage flexibility, and fixed-term employment contracts), budget deficit reductions, public sector downsizing, massive cutbacks in social security benefits, the creation of a low wage job sector, privatization of state property, and the increase of excise duties. Hence, austerity can be conceptualized as a hegemonic articulation.

Social sedimentation—the naturalization of relations of domination—involves the process of habit formation through repetition. Repetition is accordingly part of every hegemonic operation (Butler, 2000, pp. 39–41). When specific hegemonic articulations are rearticulated repeatedly over a certain period of time, they can become hegemonic projects. A hegemonic project “functions as a surface on which dislocations and social demands can be inscribed” (Laclau, 1990b, p. 63; Torfing, 1999, pp. 151–152). If successful, they constitute “a new space of representation” (Laclau, 1990b, p. 61), and construct and stabilize systems of meanings. This entails the formulation of policy programs and a political agenda that functions as a unifying principle for this specific hegemonic project (Bertramsen, 1991, p. 110). It follows that a hegemonic project involves a variety of actors who have been able to translate their particular approach to a given social, economic, or political problem into a general policy program. In most cases, the policy program already constitutes a compromise among the various actors.

Social practice and hegemonic struggles are embedded in historically specific discourses—that is to say, historically specific structures, logics, and rules (Howarth/Stavrakakis, 2000, p. 2). The term discourse formation denotes such a relatively stable spatio-temporal structure, including general concepts and values of social order (Laclau, 2000c, p. 284; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 105). The term highlights the contingent and discursive fundament of every society where meaning no longer floats freely but has become largely fixed: the horizon of possibilities is limited. A successfully stabilized discourse formation is similar to what Gramsci calls a historical bloc (Gramsci, 1971, p. 366). It is a contingent product of specific historical articulations that has been formed through hegemonic struggles (Laclau & Mouffe, 1990, p. 111). The discursive space, which is always already partially structured,

constantly affects the ongoing rearrangement of the discursive elements in a selective manner: some forms of regulation or reorganization are more privileged than are others. Nevertheless, coherence is always limited and tentative.

The social order of society cannot be easily transformed into a different social order because of power relations that are deeply inscribed within the social matrix. Thus, the sedimented relations demonstrate a certain stability—temporal continuity. It follows that the social structure of a society is not neutral. Accordingly, every form of discourse formation comprises different layers of sedimented—and, therefore, more or less durable—actions and routinizations. Seen from this perspective, nothing meaningful exists outside discourses.⁶ At least to a certain degree, these temporal stabilizations reflect the historical relations of force.

HOW SOMETHING BECOMES HEGEMONIC

Whether different policies as parts of a hegemonic project are able to become hegemonic depends on the strategic effectiveness of the protagonists to handle potential contradictions and oppositions and to deal successfully with the dislocations that continually threaten the hegemonic project. Recurrent claims upon state administration bodies to change their policies can represent a sign of hegemonic rift. If protagonists of a hegemonic project do not deal with such claims, the rifts can expand. As a result, the various claims, at some point, can form a counter-hegemonic chain of equivalence. When a counter-hegemonic chain of equivalence grows larger, it can reach the stage where it transcends and represents formerly isolated and separate claims. A resulting potential exists for the specific field of discourse to dichotomize and for counter-hegemonic movements to arise (Laclau, 2005, pp. 77–83). The overall climate vis-à-vis the hegemonic project may then change. In order to prevail, a hegemonic project has to be articulated in such a way that a multiplicity of subjects, actors, and relevant forces act on the assumption that the implementation of the project is prerequisite to achieving the (imaginary) common good. From this, it follows that at some point in time every hegemonic project needs a special signifier as a medium of representation that serves as a nodal point and “unifies a given field, constitutes its identity” (Žižek, 1989, p. 95). These nodal points of meaning are called “master” or “empty” signifiers.⁷ The production and construction of master signifiers is essential to establish hegemony (Wullweber, 2015). Accordingly, it is indispensable in any discourse-theoretical policy analysis to examine whether a hegemonic project with its various policy programs is already linked to a master signifier, whether competing master signifiers exist, or whether a master signifier is in the making. Furthermore, the hegemonic project in general, and the master signifier in particular, has to have a positive relation vis-à-vis the (hegemonic) common good within the discourse formation in question (Torfing, 1999, p. 152).

Strategic articulations constitute an important part of political processes. They mark attempts to establish relations between different discursive elements. Strategic articulations are modes of organizing reality. However, one overarching strategy or single interest of a certain group protecting a hegemonic project rarely exists. In policy analysis, we instead find different and often contradicting interests and strategies. Moreover, some discourses

underlying or attached to the hegemonic project may produce unintended side-effects—for example, by being taken up, articulated, and disarranged by other actors in different contexts.

Hegemonic strategies are specific forms of articulations that strengthen, promote, and/or stabilize a hegemonic project. The notion of hegemonic strategies refers to conscious and unconscious practices to stabilize (or destabilize) a discourse formation.⁸ However, because it is quite difficult to find a congruent and separate strategy, it is the task of policy analysis to identify patterns that have what Wittgenstein calls family resemblances (Wittgenstein, 1953). In light of these considerations, I suggest that it is possible analytically to subsume recurring patterns of articulation under certain strategy clusters. A strategy cluster comprises strategies that recur in a nonidentical but similar form and support a hegemonic project with its specific policy programs.

In general, hegemonic strategies can strengthen the relation to the common good, weaken negative associations—positive relations to deficiency, or make alternatives to the hegemonic project tendentially unthinkable. There are two basic principles: the articulation of a relation of difference, and the articulation of a relation of equivalence. While the first leads to increasing complexity, the latter results in a simplification of political space (Laclau, 2005, p. 70; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 130).

DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES IN POLICY ANALYSIS

In the following, I propose various strategy clusters that could be used to evaluate policy processes: (a) articulation of a master signifier; (b) strategic boundary drawing; (c) articulation of equivalence; (d) strategies of legitimate difference; (e) antagonistic strategies; (f) strategic expansion of the chain of equivalence; (g) strategies of coercion; and (h) counter-hegemonic strategies. I suggest that this analytical toolkit captures some of the most important strategies for conducting a discourse-theoretical policy analysis. In the following, I will outline these strategy clusters and exemplify them by analyzing how austerity policies have been constituted as the *raison d'état* for the governance of the eurozone crisis.

During the course of the financial crisis, from 2007 onward, most parts of the European banking system became accepted as a common good that had to be rescued by means of exceptional policies and extraordinary readiness to increase the debt burden of national budgets, among other things, by developing huge recovery plans, creating so-called bad banks, financing bank bailouts, and providing state guarantees for loans. The resulting high level of public debt led to negative fiscal balances (Aglietta, 2012, pp. 17–18). In the eurozone, the articulation prevailed that high budget deficits posed a security problem for the area; further, that economic security could only be achieved by exceptional austerity measures, which in part were historically unique in scale and scope (IMF, 2010). As outlined above, the various policies related to austerity can be analytically conceptualized as a hegemonic project.⁹ The most prominent actor in the promotion and enforcement of austerity is the so-called troika formed by the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. However, there are also many other relevant actors: for example, the Eurogroup, whose members include the finance ministers of the eurozone; representatives of

the European Stability Mechanism; and heads of state, most importantly of Germany, France, and—until Brexit—the U.K.

(a) Strategic articulation of master signifiers. As stated above, the kernel of a hegemonic project is a master signifier. For this reason, master signifiers are often central to political analysis (Schirrmacher, 2001). However, a master signifier does not simply exist. Neither is there a signifier that would be intrinsically a master signifier. Master signifiers come into existence because different social forces struggle to represent the general interest and the common good. Through strategic articulations, certain particularities become transformed into universalities—master signifiers.¹⁰ In the governance of the eurozone crisis, the signifiers structural reforms and fiscal consolidation serve as master signifiers that unify the austerity project. In addition, the universal threat of economic recession serves well as a strong negative universal signifier (European Commission, 2013). Articulations are modes of organizing reality. The austerity project is closely linked to European economic and financial stability as a common good for the eurozone. Relations of deficiency, such as links between austerity and the ongoing recession, or the rising unemployment rate and the increasing debt ratio, have to be countered (by arguments, for example, that austerity measures take time to bring about an effect).¹¹

(b) Strategic boundary drawing covers. These are articulations that pry open a chain of equivalence, and exclude certain elements from that chain. It is a strategy that articulates elements within discourses that are hegemonically framed as completely different. It entails the claim that certain elements (e.g., policies) have nothing to do with other elements (e.g. policy outcomes, such as unemployment etc.). Laclau calls this kind of exteriority social heterogeneity (2005, pp. 139–156). Prevailing articulations of boundary drawing claimed that the high level of national debt in countries such as Greece, Spain, and Portugal had nothing to do with the financial market crisis, the resulting economic crisis, and the national rescue measures (Mahnkopf, 2012, pp. 474–475). The situation came to be portrayed instead as a sovereign debt crisis. The boundary drawing between the financial market crisis and the sovereign debt crisis was quite successful. Even states like Spain, which had formerly complied with the criteria of the European Stability and Growth Pact (in contrast to Germany), were cautioned to exercise fiscal discipline (Young & Semmler, 2011). Related to this articulation was another boundary drawing, which successfully claimed that every country was individually responsible for its own economic problems (countering claims to steer toward a European transfer union).

(c) Cluster articulation of equivalence. This consists of strategies that express equivalence between different issues or demands. In the years 2008 and 2009, after the U.S. subprime mortgage crisis had induced the global financial market crisis, almost all governments in the eurozone shared the belief that there was no choice but to bail out the most important banks and to stabilize the financial market. One of the strongest articulations to legitimate these policies was the construction of a chain of equivalence between the financial market crisis and the Great Depression of 1929 (Eichengreen, 2015).

This cluster can also entail strategies to articulate equivalence between potentially antagonistic demands or articulations. It integrates potentially antagonistic articulations into the hegemonic project. It handles them differentially, each detached from the others (Laclau, 2005, p. 73). By way of this strategy, critical articulations become integrated into the hegemonic camp—everyone is apparently pulling together in the same direction. Differences are

blurred and equivalences highlighted.¹² As a result, a political discourse becomes strategically simplified. This is based on an attitude that there are no “real” differences, but only gradual ones, and these gradual differences simply require some mediation. Still, the inclusion of critical articulations is a double-edged affair. On the one hand, it stabilizes the hegemonic chain of equivalence. On the other, the chain itself could change throughout that process in unforeseeable ways. In the end, this can also lead to a destabilization of the hegemonic chain. The articulation of equivalence between demands to fight inequality and the austerity policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) could at some point lead to a destabilization of the austerity policies, given the growing inequality among peoples, especially in those states with rigid austerity programs (Financial Times, 2016a).

(d) Articulations of legitimate difference form another cluster. These strategies aim at penetrating already existing antagonistic borders. They dissolve certain elements of an antagonistic chain from that chain and integrate them gradually into the hegemonic chain of equivalence. Potentially antagonistic demands become simple contradictions—legitimate differences—within the hegemonic project. In the eurozone crisis, strategies of legitimate differences involved the opening of the economic policy-making process to a more Keynesian form of macroeconomic policies or unconventional monetary policies by the European Central Bank (ECB). This occurred, for example, when the ECB lowered the interest rate to zero, and Mario Draghi, President of the ECB, pledged to do “whatever it takes to preserve the euro” (Financial Times, 2012). The ECB’s sovereign debt-buying plan (quantitative easing) and the so-called Investment Plan for Europe are also concessions to demands of a more Keynesian nature.

Such strategies strengthen a hegemonic project not only by allowing critical voices to be heard, but also by potentially including critical actors as an active part of the project in question. Their ability to mobilize further critical forces is blocked. Again, this is not a unilateral process considering that the hegemonic project is also subject to change. In many cases, the incorporation of critical actors means offering concessions to these new partners. At a certain point, however—once the monetary policies of the ECB are largely exhausted, for example—these developments could pose a problem that undermines the very core of the austerity project. The more contradictory these policies become, the more unstable the austerity project grows. Indeed, strategies of legitimate difference must not go beyond a certain critical point, as by questioning the very core of the hegemonic project (the core of the austerity project consists of policies linked to neoliberal structural reforms and fiscal consolidation).

(e) Antagonistic strategies. These entail the separation of the discursive field into opposite camps in order to stabilize the hegemonic structuration (Laclau, 1999, p. 137). Poststructural hegemony theory is based on the assumption that society is constitutively divided. The radical outside, represented by antagonistic counterparts, marks the very possibility for stabilizing identities. These antagonistic divisions potentially cross every social sphere, while no antagonism is a priori more important or dominant than are others (Laclau, 1996b, p. 53). In the governance of the eurozone crisis, a specific antagonism was constructed: countries with fiscal discipline, frugality, and hard-working people, on the one hand, were contrasted with countries characterized by unbalanced state budgets, idleness, and people living beyond their means, on the other (Kutter, 2014; Stanley, 2014). These powerful and strategic articulations led to the division of the discursive field into antagonistic camps. The antagonistic division

became very obvious particularly in 2015 during the negotiations between the left wing Greek government, the European troika, and the Eurogroup.

From a poststructuralist perspective, however, there is no such thing as an objective antagonism. Even if the research field is divided into antagonistic camps, the antagonistic frontier—the course of the boundary line—is rarely identical from every perspective. The antagonistic camp(s) will always be something more than the simple opposite(s) of the hegemonic force. For policy analysis, it is, therefore, necessary not to look for one single antagonistic border, but to be aware of the different perspectives from which different antagonisms are constructed. Analytically, the presence of antagonistic frontiers can be a sign of a stable hegemonic discourse. This is because, as indicated above, hegemonic projects do not have a positive identity. They need the construction of a radical outside in order to ensure their own long-term existence. The radical outside of the austerity project is marked by menaces, such as economic recession, noncompetitiveness of the industrial sector, and slow or declining economic growth.

(f) Strategic expansion of the chain of equivalence. This entails selecting and adding (more or less uncontroversial) particularities into the hegemonic chain. The more the chain expands, the more weight it has vis-à-vis competing projects. At the same time, it becomes more and more unstable, because it becomes more difficult due to the growing complexity of keeping the different articulations together (Laclau, 2005, p. 75). In the eurozone crisis, austerity policies were strongly linked to price stability. Price stability policies, which imply both the countering of deflation and high inflation, together with austerity policies, are positioned as a guarantee for the stability of the eurozone. Furthermore, price stability and the more Keynesian-oriented investment plans are articulated as being contrary to one another.

(g) Strategies of coercion. In the eurozone, coercion to comply with austerity policies was (and still is) of great importance. In order to receive money from the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), countries had to consent to rigid fiscal policies (European Council, 2011; European Parliament/EU Council, 2013). Policies and agreements such as the Six-Pack, the Two-Pack, the Fiscal Pact, and the introduction of the European Semester guaranteed fiscal surveillance. This framework constituted elements of coercion, forcing the member states to comply with austerity policies. In this way, the governance of the eurozone crisis comprised strong austerity measures, weakening the sovereignty of states over their fiscal policies. One strong example of coercive measures was the steady reduction of the Emergency Liquidity Assistance (ELA) by the ECB to the Bank of Greece in mid-2015 in the run-up to the Greek referendum on the question of whether Greece should accept the austerity conditions imposed by the troika. A week before the referendum, the ECB shut down the ELA credit lines. Because capital was flowing out of the country and in order to prevent financial chaos, the Greek government immediately had to introduce capital controls and close Greek banks (Financial Times, 2015).

Coercive measures are part of every discourse formation. By definition, every hegemonic constellation includes coercion. The more that coercive measures increase in relation to consensual elements, however, the less stable the discourse formation becomes. The constellation then moves more in the direction of transformism, which, in turn, could strengthen counter-hegemonic chains of equivalence (see below).

(h) Counter-hegemonic strategies. Basically, counter-hegemonic strategies operate in the same way as hegemonic strategies. The only difference, but an important one analytically and politically speaking, is that they attempt to counter hegemonic strategies. At the

beginning of 2015, after successfully uniting disparate social forces in Greece (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014), the newly elected Syriza government launched several attempts to form a counter-hegemonic bloc in order to oppose the austerity measures imposed by the troika. However, it failed even in its attempt to build a coalition with states such as Italy and France, which previously had taken a somewhat critical stand toward the overall governance of the eurozone crisis. The Greek government faced the opposition of virtually every other European member state. Its attempts were unsuccessful to establish a relation of equivalence between austerity policies and high unemployment rates on the one hand and democracy, dignity, and the need to maintain sovereignty over fiscal policies on the other (Tsipras, 2015a,b). Even the June 2015 referendum, in which more than 60 percent of the Greek population voted against the bailout conditions of the troika, had no effect on the austerity measures. The Greek government was not even able to change the conditions of the next urgently needed bailout tranche. Generally speaking, the different layers of sedimentation in the hegemonic discourse formation have remained unchanged.

LAYERS OF SEDIMENTATION AND VECTORS OF HEGEMONY

The following criteria can serve as a guideline to assess the degree of hegemony that a hegemonic project has attained within a given discourse formation. First, the general rate of approval for the policy programs involved should be analyzed (in the form of opinion polls, for example, or a referendum like the one held in Greece). The number of individuals who have a positive or negative attitude toward a hegemonic project can indicate whether or not it enjoys active acceptance on a large scale, or whether acceptance merely represents acquiescence or more passive consent.¹³ With respect to the austerity project, it is obvious that many people do not concur with the associated policies. Especially in Southern Europe, but also in other parts of the European Union, the level of unemployment remains high (Eurostat, 2015). In some countries, such as Greece and Portugal but also in Spain, many people explicitly voted for parties with an antiausterity program.

Second, the relationship between the hegemonic project and the respective discourse formation should be specified. Questions to ask in this connection are: How congruently does the hegemonic project fit into the overall discourse formation? Is the hegemonic project tied to other discourses by which it is supported and strengthened? A discourse formation has been conceptualized as a stratified hegemony consisting of various layers with different degrees of sedimentation. As has been outlined, sedimentation happens as a result of discursive strategies. The more that a hegemonic project becomes successfully articulated as a universality, the more it is taken for granted as a common good for society. As argued above, layers of sedimentation are not extra-discursive or extra-semiotic. A liberal world order, for example, or a profit-oriented and market-based economy, a certain accumulation regime, or an international institutional governance structure are quintessentially discursive constructions. However, because they have become widely accepted and form part of what many people hold to be common sense consistent with their everyday experience, the structures appear to be natural and extra-discursive.

The governance of the eurozone crisis has been taking place against the background in which “the discourse on economic security is ... shaped largely by the dominance of the liberal agenda and by the consequences of attempts to implement that agenda in the areas of trade, production, and finance” (Buzan, Waeber, & Wilde, 1998, p. 97). Accordingly, the liberal economic order portrays a highly sedimented socioeconomic layer. It constitutes an important background against which other layers have to resonate in one way or another. The austerity project is deeply embedded within the Stability and Growth Pact, which sets a ceiling of 60 percent on the government debt-to-GDP ratio while limiting the government budget deficit to 3 percent of the GDP. Building on the Stability and Growth Pact, policies such as the Six-Pack, the Two-Pack, the Fiscal Pact, and the European Semester display a strong sedimentation of the austerity project. These layers are followed by the more heavily criticized—and hence more unstable—layer of the time frame for meeting the targets of the Stability and Growth Pact, as well as the question of how to achieve those targets. Highly politicized and barely sedimented is the question that has arisen more recently about the role of government spending and investment programs designed to counter recession in the eurozone.

Third, it is useful to specify the form of hegemony. Gramsci introduces two vectors in this respect: transformism and expansive hegemony. Transformism denotes a strategy that co-opts potentially antagonistic forces. It refers to “the gradual but continuous absorption, achieved by methods which varied in their effectiveness, of the active elements produced by allied groups—and even of those which came from antagonistic groups and seemed irreconcilably hostile” (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 58–59). If successful, the result is passive consensus, which Gramsci also terms a “revolution without a revolution” or a “passive revolution” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 59). In the process of transformism, the competing social forces are less convinced, but politically disorganized. As Gramsci puts it: “In this sense political leadership became merely an aspect of the function of domination—in as much as the absorption of the enemies’ élites means their decapitation, and annihilation” (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 58–59). Strategies of transformism allow the project to be enforced without majority public approval. Nevertheless, this form of hegemony is rather unstable, because it is not based on active consent. Still, it can have relative stability—if there are strong coercive measures in place (i.e., if the price for deviating or noncompliance is high)—or if the topic is not recognized as an important issue by the population at large, and a certain indifference prevails. This is also true for situations characterized by the strong feeling that alternatives are lacking. The term expansive hegemony, in contrast, describes a situation where the hegemonic project has become successfully articulated in such a way that the majority of the people tendentially regard it as desirable. For such situations, Gramsci introduces the metaphor of the “modern prince.” This can be understood in terms of a hegemonic project that has been comprehensively sedimented into a discourse formation: “The modern Prince, as it develops, revolutionizes the whole system of intellectual and moral relations ... [T]he Prince takes the place of divinity or the categorical imperative, and becomes the basis ... of all aspects of life and of all customary relationships” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 133). In this sense, expansive hegemony is an encompassing hegemonic situation. It involves the formation of a popular collective will—an active consent of the masses. The result is remarkably robust. In the process of becoming established, it is usually necessary for the hegemonic forces to make major concessions to other social groups.

The current governance of the eurozone crisis can be described as a form of transformism. It is a passive revolution in the sense that many people do not concur with the neoliberal structural reforms and fiscal austerity policies. Alternatives to these policies seem to be very limited, however. The only other option for member states would be to leave the EU. However, the way out of the EU could have disastrous effects as well. In the southern countries, both conservative and social-democratic parties have followed policies of austerity. Some governments have even been run by technocrats who were not elected. Moreover, even parties with an explicit antiausterity program, such as Syriza, have not been able substantially to change austerity policies. The Portuguese socialist government, which came into power at the end of 2015, and which receives support (but also pressure) in parliament from other left-leaning parties, has to some extent succeeded in changing the course of fiscal policy. In this situation, however, the impact of coercive measures established in the eurozone in the years following the financial crisis becomes visible again. At the beginning of 2016, the first budget plan of the Portuguese government was rejected by the European Commission on the grounds that its antiausterity policies constituted serious noncompliance with the fiscal rules of the eurozone (Financial Times, 2016b). This was the first time that a eurozone government had its spending plan rejected by Brussels (Financial Times, 2016c). Later in the year, the European Commission fined Spain and Portugal for not complying with EU fiscal rules. They were the first eurozone countries ever sanctioned for breaking those rules (Financial Times, 2016d) (Figure 1).

Fourth, it would be helpful to ascertain the specific discursive space within which the hegemonic project struggles for hegemony. Determining whether a certain common sense issue, a form of regulation, or a social relation has become hegemonic is perhaps the hardest problem for analyzing and evaluating the degree of enforcement of a hegemonic project. The difficulty of such an assessment increases the more a hegemonic project has already become established. Once a hegemonic project has become a deeply ingrained part of common sense, it is very difficult to reactivate the political roots. In this context, it could be interesting to examine whether some alternatives to the hegemonic project have already been made unthinkable. Accordingly, and cutting across the two categories transformism and expansive hegemony, I suggest two further analytical vectors that may make it possible to evaluate the form of hegemony—concentrated hegemony and diffused hegemony. A concentrated hegemony is a form of hegemony where interests and actors are tendentially more obvious than in a diffused hegemony. In a diffused hegemony, interests and actors are more blurred and dispersed. They are more deeply fused within the hegemonic matrix. A certain mode of development, a certain element of common sense is privileged, and the actors involved are not obvious. Even though there is no single interest on the part of a certain group, it can be argued, together with Krugman (Krugman, 2013), that European austerity measures and the turning away from fiscal policies such as economic stimulus plans have so far been more favorable to creditors and money-holders than to employees (see also Scherrer, 2011, 2014, pp. 348–349; see, however, Young & Semmler, 2011). While long-term unemployment figures are stagnating or even rising, profit levels have improved, and stock prices have increased in the period since the global financial crisis up to mid-2016.

While the austerity project has been supported for the most part by European governments, the European Commission, and the elites, popular acceptance in the eurozone continues to be quite low, especially in states implementing austerity measures while in economic

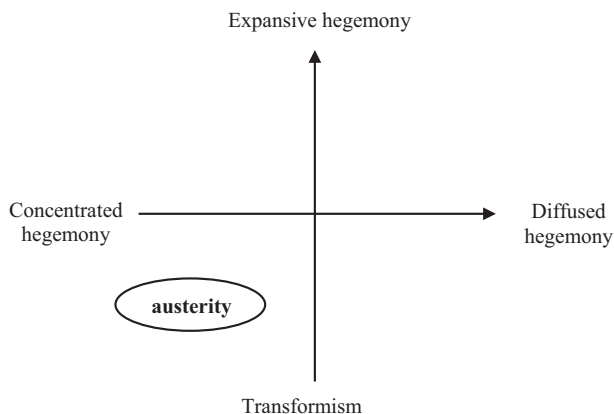


FIGURE 1 Grid of Hegemony

Source: Author's design.

recession. This implies instability in the status of the austerity project, even though coercive measures have so far stabilized the associated discourse. As a result, the various claims, at some point, can form a counter-hegemonic chain of equivalence. “If those frustrations ... end up being expressed in political action ... that is a problem” (D. Lipton, First Deputy Managing Director of the IMF, quoted in *Financial Times*, 2016a). The more these claims are ignored or disregarded, the greater the possibility grows for such a counter-hegemonic chain of equivalence to come into being. If the claims are steadily disregarded, they can become antagonistic. A switch may occur once a critical mass of political actors is able to articulate alternative chains of equivalence, uniting competing meanings and unsatisfied individuals into a broader counter-hegemonic chain of equivalence. At present, apart from Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and the left wing parties in Portugal, it is predominantly the political parties on the far right that are gaining ground and usurping the popular terrain with their claims. This may induce prevailing consensus between or among important and leading actors to disintegrate. In addition, more relevant actors may join the antagonistic camp. When this happens, it becomes impossible to carry out simple changes, because the discourse formation as such becomes destabilized. However, it is important to emphasize that the austerity project is not a hidden one guided by elite actors. The term austerity project is rather used to analytically identify and call attention to various (at times possibly even contradictory and unintended) policy programs and strategies that show family resemblances in propelling a specific form of economic stability in the eurozone. Finally, it should be borne in mind that the vectors of hegemony do not point to a fixed situation. On the contrary, the passage between them is blurred. There is no clear-cut border line. They are analytical categories that indicate certain tendencies within an overall vibrant and fluid field of hegemony.

CONCLUSION

The article outlines some conceptual considerations toward the development of a discourse-theoretical approach to policy analysis. It proposes a poststructuralist concept of hegemony

as a theoretical tool to analyze the conflict-ridden process of constructing horizons of truths. On this basis, it offers some tentative thoughts on how hegemonic projects and articulation strategies can be operationalized and suggests methods to differentiate between forms of hegemony. It substantiates the term discourse formation by developing a stratified concept of hegemony, and offers some reflections on requirements that must be met for a hegemonic project to prevail and to become established.

While the different critical approaches to policy analysis share common ground, each approach has its own specific home domain. Critical discourse analysis provides an array of conceptual categories for language analysis and includes areas such as sociolinguistics, theories of argumentation and conversation, and content analysis. This is also true for argumentative discourse analysis and partly for discursive institutionalism, although the latter lays emphasis on contextual analysis—in other words where, when, how, and why something was said (Schmidt, 2008). For the most part, methods are based on textual and linguistic analysis scrutinizing rhetorical argumentation strategies and linguistic regularity (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). Basically, what is concerned here is the analysis of language-in-use. Cultural political economy has its home domain in the analysis of institutional arrangements and processes of variation, selection, and retention of semiotic elements. With its strong roots in state theory and regulation theory, this approach is certainly at the forefront when it comes to the analysis of the specific spatiotemporal structures and economic imaginaries of the capitalist state, the historical change of state structure, and the spatiotemporal selectivities of state institutions (Jessop & Sum, 2006; Sum & Jessop, 2013). Apart from these approaches, there have also been some interesting developments toward a historical materialist policy analysis, a relatively new approach with a strong focus on social reproduction and the condensation of force relations within capitalist state apparatuses (Brand, 2013).

A discourse-theoretical approach to policy analysis, as outlined in this article, facilitates an investigation that places analytical emphasis on the actor's strategies to pursue or to counter certain policies and to legitimize some policy measures over others. The conflictual processes of constructing and enforcing meaning and truth and attempts to shift and repoliticize different sedimented layers within a stratified hegemony constitute the home domain of this approach. This includes the analysis of various types of struggles including strategies to launch master signifiers as representing the common good or to fill master signifiers with specific meanings. While the term discourse, as an ontological category, denotes forms of spatiotemporal social structuration, the concept of hegemony points to the very process of generating social structures. It is a perspective that emphasizes the contingency of social structures as well as the hegemonic struggles surrounding policy processes that construct political and social structures. Analyzing policies through the lens of hegemony and discourse theories implies almost by definition a need to examine the relation between the implementation of public policies and articulation strategies, considering that strategic (discursive) practices of establishing consent and gaining hegemony lie at the core of these theories.

Considering the variety of perspectives and theoretical models that exist in the field of policy analysis, it would hardly be advisable to try to develop one approach that seeks to fit all forms of policy research. A more productive approach would bear in mind the strengths and weaknesses of each individual paradigm in comparison with others. At the same time, it could be useful and, in some cases, necessary to think beyond paradigms and to exercise

what Sil and Katzenstein call an “analytic eclecticism” (Sil & Katzenstein, 2010). Following this line of reasoning, I suggest following an ethos of openness and critical respect that acknowledges the diversity of research traditions. This in no way implies a simple and uncritical amalgamation of diverse, and perhaps even contradictory, approaches. It instead invokes an appreciation of the different intellectual developments and the strengths of each approach (see Brand, 2013, pp. 437–439; Fairclough, 2013, pp. 193–194; Glynos, 2009, pp. 6–7).

The present discourse–theoretical approach to policy analysis constitutes an attempt to rework and operationalize theoretical concepts and tools. It builds on the hope that the effort will serve as an impulse to revitalize and strengthen discussion around the different approaches to policy analysis from a critical, antiessentialist, and postpositivist point of view. Based on the idea that discourses are constitutive of political, economic, and social reality, it holds that meaning is never fixed but that there is always an undecidable play of signification. At the same time, discourses do not emerge accidentally; the social fabric of society is generated and structured through contingent struggles, which are constrained and yet not determined by the discursive structure. It follows that every social relation has political roots, regardless of whether it is articulated in economic, technological, private, cultural, or other terms. The primacy of the political marks the point of departure for such an approach. As a corollary, it is able immensely to broaden the field of policy analysis. It is a challenge for critical policy analysis to view the conflict-ridden ground of societies as a starting point for research, while at the same time remaining alert to various modes of hegemonic stabilizations. From this perspective, crafting policy analysis implies a reflection and engagement with the new challenges of our times. Last but not least, it also requires confrontation with the question of justice, as Derrida has argued: “Consequently, never to yield on this point, constantly to maintain an interrogation of the origin, grounds and limits of our conceptual, theoretical or normative apparatus surrounding justice is on deconstruction’s part anything but a neutralization of interest in justice” (Derrida, 1992, p. 20).

NOTES

1. I draw on the theoretical concepts developed mainly by Laclau. Apart from the joint publications (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, 1990, 2001), works by Mouffe are not taken into account here
2. See, however, Griggs and Howarth (2007); Glynos, Klimecki, and Willmott (2015).
3. The term operationalization is used here in a broad sense to describe the process of developing middle-range concepts from abstract ontological categories in order to enable and facilitate the application of these categories in empirical analysis.
4. Although there is a large amount of excellent literature in which the theory of hegemony and discourse is applied, when it comes to operationalizing the concepts, especially where policy analysis is concerned, almost all such studies remain highly abstract (e.g., Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Howarth & Torfing, 2005; Howarth, Norval, & Stavrakakis, 2000; Norval, 2007; Stavrakakis, 2007).
5. A common good always has a universal connotation. Otherwise it would not be common.
6. Space does not permit a detailed discussion here of the many misunderstandings which have arisen over the extra-discursive meaning of objects. As Laclau and Mouffe have already argued: “The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought... What is denied is not that... objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves [meaningfully] as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 108). The main and most tenacious mistake is the tendency to confuse linguistics with

semantics, and mistake the right claim, that there is meaning outside the realm of language, for the wrong claim, that meanings exist outside of discourses. In poststructuralist theory, discourses constitute the very terrain in which objects, events, subjects, identities, numbers, and the like are accorded meaning.

7. Laclau uses the terms master signifier and empty signifier synonymously (Laclau, 2005, p. 217; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. xi). In the following, I prefer the term master signifier, because the concept of the empty signifier often leads to confusion when it is assumed that the empty signifier would be meaningless. What is implied, however, is that the signifier has been tendentially emptied from its particularity so as to be able to acquire universal significance.
8. The concepts interests and strategies do not necessarily imply a rationalist and utilitarian subject (see also Laclau, 1990b; Laclau & Zac, 1994).
9. I stress the term analytically here, because from an analytical viewpoint, it does not matter whether the hegemonic project is constructed purposefully, or whether various policies can be coherently grouped as forming a hegemonic project without necessarily assuming conscious participation in the project on the part of (all) actors involved.
10. There are no causal explanations for the prevalence of certain master signifiers. Rather, it is a task for policy analysis to specify the concrete reasons and the spatiotemporal discourse constellations that have led to the construction and enforcement of certain master signifiers.
11. To be sure, the unemployment rate is not an extra-discursive condition. On the contrary, the meaning, definition, and counting of unemployment and the calculations as well as statistics portraying the unemployment rate are fully situated within the discursive realm.
12. For example, by demands for a second round of debt relief schemes for Greece, to which the Eurogroup agreed in 2012. The plan should have been implemented in 2014. However, the decision to do so has meanwhile been postponed by the Eurogroup until 2018 (Stourmaras, 2016).
13. It should be noted in this connection, however, that public opinion polls themselves are instruments of power. In addition, it is very difficult to register passive consent. There may be a considerable number of subaltern subjects that “cannot speak” (Spivak, 1988).

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Joscha Wullweber is an assistant professor in Political Science in the Department of Globalisation and Politics at the University of Kassel, Germany. His most recent publications include contributions to the journals *Critical Policy Studies* and *New Political Economy* and to the *Encyclopedia of Political Thought*.