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THEMATIC SECTION
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Discourse: Education, Theory of Politics, and Politics of Theory

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Abstract

In this paper, I revisit and reflect on my own and my research partners' attempts at investigating the relationship between education and politics through the lens of discourse theory and discourse analysis methodology. This auto-analytical reflection corresponds to the shift in discourse studies from a technically understood discourse analysis to a more generally conceived discourse-analytical approach (Howarth & Torfing, 2005). Revisiting my own analyses made me understand better not only the specificity of the ways of conducting discourse studies in which I have been involved but also some less obvious ontological assumptions and methodological problems of discourse studies. One such issue is that as long as discourse analysis is powerful in how it shows power relations, and thus politics within non-political phenomena like education, its application to political theory may reveal how its desire for construing social totalities grounds it in the pedagogical.

Keywords: discourse studies, methodology, education, politics, social ontology.

Introduction

Throughout the text, I refer to the methodology and some of the findings of three research projects in which I participated. The first was the *Journeymen* project – an EU-funded research into transitions between higher education and work in four European countries (European Commission, 2005; Dahlgren et al., 2007). The second was a study on the discursive construction of subjectivity (Szkudlarek, 2008; Cackowska et al., 2012), while the third was a theoretical investigation into the politics of educational theory (Szkudlarek, 2014; 2016). However, before I turn to those projects, I need to reflect on the discourse analysis method as “something to follow”.

Is there a discourse analysis method?

In their classic work, Teun van Dijk and his collaborators presented a collection of diverse ways of investigating discourse, organised by the axes of “structure” and “process” (van Dijk, 1997). Discourse analysis appears here as an array of conceptions connected by ontological assumptions that social realities are structured by signs, their grammars and their uses; that such phenomena have formative and performative potentials; that what and how they construe or represent is not neutral and can make some things possible or impossible; that they position us as subjects within their grammars; and that though some such operations remain invisible, they can be identified by critical minds. Research into this complex field cannot be described as a single and unitary method.

My personal path through this field emerged from my previous interests in critical pedagogy, which made me inclined towards Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2013), and post-structural philosophy, which drew me towards Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and their ways of seeing negativity as constitutive. There is void or contingent heterogeneity where one expects the centre, and undecidability where one assumes foundations. Derrida’s objection against seeing deconstruction as “a method” is linked to that elusive foundation of discourse in the negative and to the impossibility of fixing “the”

structure as something that may last and lend itself to replication in analyses that might follow the trace of deconstruction. As I have experienced “a failure to follow” myself, I need to explain it in more detail.

The origins of the word “method” include “pursuit, a following after” among the oldest, original meanings (Online Etymology Dictionary, nd). This trace of following was, for instance, behind Gadamer’s understanding of the term (Gadamer, 2013). But can one *follow* Foucault or Derrida? Can their results be replicated – and would that make much sense? Is it not the uniqueness of their works that makes them significant? Still, even if one cannot follow Derrida methodically, one can see in his studies why deconstruction is *the* way of studying the universe in which – as discourse theory tends to assume – all, including the subject, including Derrida and Foucault themselves, is textual. If there is no way beyond textuality, we need to look for a point from which to gain distance – a prerequisite for understanding – within the text itself. A point of discontinuity, a fold, a dislocation that refuses to be “an element” of the structure, even when it occupies a privileged (and at the same time marginal) position from which the structure can be seen. This is where Derrida’s undecidables reside.

Is there, then, a method of discourse analysis? The debate over Derrida’s deconstruction shows that there is a desire for a method. One must proceed somehow and be able to tell the story of how one found what one did. However, “following after” (a person like Derrida, or a procedure like deconstruction), we have no guarantee that what we find is what we are looking for. As we read in Foucault (1970), discourse is “rare”, discontinuous, and eventual, which makes its finding, especially when one “follows a method”, rather elusive. However, before I learned how to “let things go” and keep my eyes open to what happens on the way rather than expecting it at the end of the way I follow, I worked on two projects where to have or not to have a method was not a matter of choice or an epistemic position, but a prerequisite of performing research at all—especially externally funded research in collaborative and international settings. In the third project, the method was turned on to itself.

Students as Journeymen

After years of “doing critical pedagogy”, where education is political and analysed as deeply embedded in structures of social inequalities, critical discourse analysis (CDA) became my almost “natural” methodological identification. I also investigated media cultures (Szkudlarek, 1998), where deconstruction and post-structural understanding of discourse were more appropriate. With this dual experience, in 2000, I was invited by my Swedish and Norwegian colleagues to participate in preparing the application for a European grant on the transition between higher education and work. In the methodological design of this eventually successful application,¹ we combined phenomenography, critical theory, discourse analysis and hermeneutics into a layered methodological design that enabled investigating the study–work connections starting with the individual perspectives of the students, through discursive operations of their universities and, after graduation, of their workplaces, to the forces of the market, national cultures, economies and educational traditions related to economic and cultural globalisation. Phenomenography allowed us to interrogate students about their conceptions of studying, work, success, responsibility, etc. Such data was then fed into the matrix of discourse analysis where we tried to see how they are situated in discourses of professional and liberal programmes in four European universities. In the next round, we investigated similar relationships concerning work in institutions where graduates found employment. Finally, all those layers were interpreted in the context of transnational developments investigated through public discourse analysis and social hermeneutics. One of the more difficult parts of this design was how to provide comparable data and first-round interpretations from national research teams. We had to use English translations of interview data and experienced first-hand and painfully what “lost in translation” means when national results were discussed internationally. We needed unified

¹ *Students as Journeymen Between Communities of Higher Education and Work*. Grant No. HPSE CT 00068-2001, 6th European Framework Programme coordinated by Linköping University in Sweden, with Lars-Owe Dahlgren as principal investigator.

templates for interview schedules and interpretations, and for the collection, analysis and interpretation of textual material gathered in institutions and the media. We developed matrices (see the Appendix) that guided us through the whole process. They included questions like who knows and who does not know something, or how is a particular piece of knowledge made accessible or not, to given subjects in given institutions. Or what material conditions (a reference to Fairclough's CDA) can be related to the particular power relation identified in the interviews? A good example of how such conditions could work comes from a pilot study where we investigated conceptions of learning in students of Gdańsk and Linköping universities. One of the surprising outcomes was that students in Gdańsk prepared for their exams in peer groups, while those in Linköping learned alone. This outcome was at odds with what we had known of the egalitarian and deliberative culture of Sweden and the rather competitive and egoistic culture of Poland; it seemed to promise an intriguing investigation into the "depths" of national cultures. A somewhat disappointing interpretation emerged when a Swedish colleague asked whether marked papers from previous exams were accessible to students publicly in the university library in Gdańsk. We the Polish team immediately said, "of course not" (as academics we "knew" that students must get to know things by studying complex books, individually and laboriously, and learning "for the exam" is not what matters), while in Sweden, this was an obvious practice: students had known what they would be expected to and what the criteria of assessment were. This very material factor—exam papers being displayed in the library—suggested a simple answer to that "cultural anomaly". Why did the Swedes learn alone? Because they could. As examination criteria were accessible in the library, they did not need to ask anybody what was important or what "worked" in examinations: the material first, then the conditions of social interaction and how they are mediated (in written text, as in Sweden, or in oral exchange as in Poland). As in Foucault (1980), the apparent "depths of the spirit" were mere outcomes of material arrangements. Another observation was that we could not have interpreted this case based on the interview data alone. To perform comparative discourse analysis, one needs the expertise of those who can interpret differences using their own situated experience

as the basis for understanding. After this pilot study, we introduced social hermeneutics as the final interpretative layer on top of phenomenography and CDA (*Critical Discourse Analysis*), applied to individual, institutional and transnational data in the methodological design of the project.

To sum up, we did have a complex, multi-layered, thoroughly designed and critically tested method. The outcome proved paradoxical. In the final evaluation of the project results by the European Commission, we read that the most significant value of the project was its highly innovative methodological design. Its weakest aspect was that the results were somewhat disappointing—perhaps, a reviewer commented, because of the innovative character of the method. Being methodologically as precise as possible in the search for a “method to follow” did not turn out to be very productive. First, because we wanted more than we could digest, or analyse, and apparently, we failed at the stage of data reduction; and second, perhaps, because the precise layout made building unexpected connections difficult.

Discourse, dislocation, investment

The second collaborative project was run by the team from the University of Gdańsk² and it built on our experiences garnered from the *Journeymen* project and other investigations into “the psychic lives of power” (to borrow a phrase from Butler, 1997) at the intersections between subjectivity, education and culture. One of its intentions was to test whether the idea of *Geisteswissenschaftliche pädagogik*,³ where education is the cultural structuration of the self, could

² *Dyskursywna konstrukcja podmiotu w wybranych obszarach kultury współczesnej* [The Discursive Construction of Subjectivity in Selected Areas of Contemporary Culture]. Grant no. PB/7300-1-363 7-7 from Ministry of Science and Higher Education, Poland, 2007–2011. The research team included Małgorzata Cackowska, Lucyna Kopciwicz, Mirosław Patalon, Karolina Starego, Piotr Stańczyk and Tomasz Szkudlarek as principal investigator.

³ This term can be translated as cultural pedagogy, but we referred to a more complex German, post-Hegelian, pedagogical tradition that was very influential in Central Europe (Poland included) between 1920s and 1960s. Personal subjectivity and identity emerge

be re-interpreted in terms of the discourse theory (Szkudlarek, 2008). We investigated cultural repertoires through which subjectivities can gain their symbolic form (as in Lacan's theory), as well as how subjects respond to such discursive constructions actively across critical points in their life-span. We focused on early childhood, gender, work, citizenship and religion, analysing cultural practices (like children's books, manifestations, etc.) relevant to those topics. As earlier, phenomenography worked as the gate to personal constructions of such cultural phenomena and was followed by specifically situated discourse analysis approaches. The insular sampling and an open approach to the ways of investigating discourse were framed in an agreed perspective on the discourse theory assumed at the point of departure of our work. That theory was finally modified to cater to the complexity of our results, such that it paraphrased the tradition of *Geisteswissenschaftliche pädagogik*.

Our methodology was consciously eclectic. We were trying to remain open to how linguistic formations relate to material forces as in CDA and the Marxist tradition, to how genealogies and power/knowledge apparatuses construe what and where we are as in Foucault, or to the work of rhetoric, including construing identities through empty signifiers as in Laclau, without foreclosing other interpretative perspectives. Instead of designing a methodological template to follow in all tasks of the project, we assumed that one cannot know what "rare" discursive operations may reveal themselves in the given empirical settings. Decisions on how to investigate them and what interpretative frameworks to use were to reflect the specificity of the given empirical material. Outlining a subjectivity theory as a result of such a multiverse and flexible approach could not imply a synthesis of our insular results, but instead, reductions and abductions whereby the material could be re-read with a different focus rather than generalised into an overarching synthesis.

The theory that we eventually proposed depicts three moves in the process of construction of subjectivity: discursive construction, structural dislocation,

there in a dialectical relation between the subjective and the objective spirit (or the self and culture). In the project, we were trying to re-write this process in contemporary culture in terms of discourse theory rather than the dialectic of the spirit.

and subjective identification. First, the subject has external origins – she is a result of social demands, power relations, coordinated social expectations (as in Mead’s theory, 2015), of being “interpellated” as in Althusser or “called to responsibility” as in Levinas, of Foucault’s *assujettissement* – etc. All those, and many other theoretical perspectives, grasp the diverse instances of such external subjection/subjectification. Second, no such determining force works alone. Whatever construes us as subjects is structurally dislocated by other forces. As Mead (2015) observed long ago, the subject is an eddy in the current of social life, a part of social life *and* dislocation of its current simultaneously. If particular discourses operate as if they “wanted” to determine the subject, their simultaneous operations can only lead to overdetermination (Althusser, 1969). Third, the subject needs identity despite its being dislocated or (as in Laclau) impossible. It must be construed somehow, and we have an array of theoretical inspirations to see how it is possible: Hegel’s retroactive grounding, Foucault’s investments and technologies of the Self (Foucault, 1988), Lacan’s mirror and identification with otherness—*objects petit a* and master figures like God or the Nation that overtake our shattered selves, etc. The most relevant account we have found in Laclau shows in detail how impossible identity can nevertheless be construed by rhetorical means (Laclau, 2005; 2014).

Two remarks are important to conclude this account. First, this is not a sequence that leads to a fixed subjectivity, but rather a replicable triangular structure where the end is a new beginning: concluding investments only resolve particular tensions between dislocating forces and the desire for identity, and such resolutions turn into a subsequent force that will soon be dislocated again. In all age groups, from infancy to retirement, we have identified the same sequences. It suggests that no identity acquired in cycles of determination, dislocation and investment is permanent. Second, Laclau’s theory was built to explicate how political identities are formed, while its mechanics of representing the impossible were paraphrased from Lacanian psychoanalysis. The fact that the self and the social can be described as operating along similar structural transformations inspired us to use Laclau in our attempt at reformulating the culture/identity connection elaborated in *Geisteswissenschaftliche pädagogik* (or cultural pedagogy as it was called

in Poland) more than a century ago. As Laclau has not developed fully the consequences of this structural homology between how the subject and the political are construable, turning this homology into a pedagogy of “how we become” as subjects among social and political forces was an important outcome of this project (Cackowska et al., 2012).

To compare this approach to the methodology of the first project, instead of using a common data collection and interpretation scheme so that findings could be aggregated into a pool from which systematic conclusions could be derived, we retained the autonomy of each case, with only minimal requirements that we link personal conceptions to the arrangements of cultural phenomena, events or practices (like picture books, holidays, manifestations, work, leisure or religious practices) and power relations that can be identified at their intersections. The concluding analysis of all those cases was built through reduction and abduction, rather than induction and synthesis. As a “sixth case”, that theoretical analysis could then be retrojected on those that supplied it with empirical material, without their being subsumed into the thus conceived theory and without their idiosyncratic richness and specificity being lost in generalisation. In a way, as I can read this experience now, what proved to be a failure in the previous project (an impossibility “to follow” the universalised scheme, or literally the failure of the method) was turned into a non-systemic framework in which what defines the whole appears *poorer* than a sum of its elements and each of those elements alone. Only by being poor, or reductive, can a theory gain a feature of transferability.

Politics of theory

In a more recent project, I investigated theories of education as discursive and performative practices.⁴ This connection speaks to a more general issue of the ontology of the social. One of the issues behind this project was the observa-

⁴ The project *Teorie pedagogiczne, polityki oświatowe a polityczna konstrukcja społeczeństwa. Analiza relacji w świetle “retoryki ontologicznej” E. Laclau* [Educational Theories and Policies and the Political Construction of Society. Analysis of their Relations in the

tion that, if discourse is political, and if every institutionalised practice can be read as discourse, the performative work of discourse theory itself might be analysed through its own critical tools. The specific question that initiated such considerations was why Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1995) ignored the educational theory as part of the disciplinary regimes of modern societies. And, if the answer were to be that the educational theory is marginal and unworthy of analytical interest, why is that so? What, within the educational theory itself, within the discourse theory, political discourse, the academe, or elsewhere, makes the education theory marginal? Further, what role can the marginality and political invisibility of a theory play in the discursive construction and theoretical reconstructions of power regimes, or social ontology in general? These questions gained flesh when I read J.F. Herbart's theory (Herbart, 1908 [1806]) through the lens of Foucault's analysis of the emergence of disciplinary power. In brief, what Foucault discovers meticulously as the process of disciplinary subjection that creates autonomous subjects, was prescribed by Herbart in detail as a purposeful strategy and methodology of drawing individuals from their primary state of reactive beings to self-controlled, will-driven autonomous subjects. Discipline, Foucault's decisive element of modern power regimes, was prescribed by Herbart almost precisely in terms that we know as Foucauldian. To give some examples:

In order that character may take a moral direction, individuality must be dipped, as it were, into fluid element, which according to circumstances either resists or favours it, but for the most part it is hardly perceptible to it. This

light of E. Laclau's "Ontological Rhetorics"] was financed by National Centre for Science, Poland, grant no. 2014/15/B/HS6/03580, and it was executed by me and by Dr F. Tony Carusi from Massey University, NZ, during 2015–2017. The analysis of educational theories of which I am speaking here was paralleled by Carusi's analysis of policies. Both those fields e contributed equally to the construction of theory, where education was identified as overdetermined (rather than determined) by other social and political forces and as a "tropological register of the social" – a rhetorical practice capable of "turning" discursive forces and, thus, as ontological in its nature (Carusi & Szkudlarek, 2020).

element is discipline which is mainly operative on the arbitrary will (Willkür), but also partly on the judgment (Herbart, 1908 [1806], p. 120).

Government only takes into account the results of actions, later on discipline must look to unexecuted intentions (Herbart, 1908 [1806], p. 233).

Foucault (1995) explicates discipline by analysing Bentham's *Panopticon* and following its logic in other institutional practices. Education is present in his analyses as if it was "unaware" of its disciplinary design, as a collection of architectural arrangements, gestures and interactions where individuation, examination and classification of pupils matter most. This approach probably starts as a methodological issue: Foucault (1980) is fascinated with minute, capillary practices behind which he can discover a political logic, and thereby rarely does he refer to elaborated texts where such logic is laid out as rational design, as preceding, explicating or justifying such practices in detail. Moreover, using Bentham as the paradigmatic case, Foucault makes grounds for identifying penitentiary institutions as those where discipline was invented as a subject-formative practice. In short, his marginal interest in pedagogical treatises became an inspiration for my own analysis of the politics of theory, of the political invisibility of certain elements of theory in modern societies, or of the visibility/invisibility strategies within theories themselves. One of my deconstructive findings was that invisibility can be related to those moments where politics and pedagogy turn to or merge one into another, to stitches, hybrids or transitions intruded into the text and then marginalised to keep politics political and pedagogy pedagogical. This is part of the *disciplinary* dimension of theory. To analyse such relations closely, I started with Rousseau's works where the multiplicity of situations in which elements of education and politics are made visible or invisible to diverse agencies, including the readers of the text, seems to have laid the ground for endless reiterations of such rhetoric. In the book that collects such analyses (Szkudlarek, 2016), I traced similar figures in Herbart, in a Polish conception of the educating society from the 1970s, and in the contemporary discourse of learning in knowledge societies. As the main interpretative framework,

I used Laclau's theory where negativity is constitutive of identity and where rhetoric is the means to construe the impossible society. Of course, one simply cannot avoid rhetorical analysis when dealing with Rousseau's paradoxical constructions, but Laclau provides for more: rhetoric is at the very heart of social ontology and helps to understand education and education theory as related to the political. In Rousseau, pedagogical means are indispensable in the construction of the conditions of possibility of modern politics: of republicanism, as in *The Social Contract*, and of its more nationalistic version as in *The Government of Poland*. Nations need to be "raised" like children (Szkudlarek, 2005), through children's games and rituals, in a controlled milieu with paradoxical relations between their "inborn" nature and the need for that nature to be constructed as per what it already is. The following quotation is an example: "Today [...] there are no longer any Frenchmen, Germans, Spaniards, or even Englishmen; there are only Europeans [...], for no one has been shaped along national lines by peculiar institutions" (Rousseau, 1972, p. 5). As in the case of Emil, whose good nature is implied and yet needs to be educated, a nation can *become* a nation if institutions that shape it operate along its national specificity which it already "has". That specificity needs to be discovered and actualized through national-republican upbringing executed accordingly to "the rules of society best suited to nations" (Rousseau, 1920, p. 72). As if being something by nature were not enough, it needs repetition, confirmation and crystallisation in institutions that reiterate the natural... only to change, or "denature" them then (1921). Homology between the ways of education and politics is confirmed in *The Social Contract*, where we read that to create a Republic, we need a Legislator: a quasi-divine lawgiver whose work strikingly resembles that of Emil's tutor. He should be "changing human nature [...], transforming each individual, who is by himself a complete and solitary whole, into part of a greater whole from which he, in a manner, receives his life and being" (Rousseau, 1921, p. 61). Like the teacher, the legislator has to split himself into a visibly present expert who works on the construction of civil, criminal and constitutional law, and an invisible demiurge preoccupied with a fourth and the most significant law,

[...] of morality, of custom, above all of public opinion; [...] With this, the great legislator concerns himself in secret, though he seems to confine himself to particular regulations; for these are only the arc of the arch, while manners and morals, slower to arise, form in the end its immovable keystone (Rousseau, 1920, p. 72).

In brief, among the ontological foundations of politics is pedagogy. Just as politics is behind the conditions of the possibility of education. In Rousseau, both nations and children derive from nature, need to be formed according to that nature, and changed in ways not directly visible to themselves (Szkudlarek, 2005). This cannot be narrated without paradoxes, as Rousseau himself admits, or, in Laclau's terms, without rhetoric that is indispensable at the intersections of the pedagogical and the political. Rhetoric, capable of making things absent and represented as present or present and represented as absent, is of ontological significance here. It construes the ground on which education and politics can work as formative powers of modern states and play their parallel games of mutual coordination, separation, and denial. Only through such separation can they acquire their disciplinary logic, and thus develop their instrumental designs.

Apart from the strategies of construing (in)visibility, I have isolated two other major *topoi* of ontological rhetoric in educational theory. The first is totality, or identity of both the individual and society, which requires metonymical articulation of heterogeneous and logically unrelated elements and their metaphorical, or catachrestic representation by empty signifiers – as analysed by Laclau, with a corrective that social ontology demands that both those domains are construed simultaneously (pedagogically and politically), which does *not* mean successfully. Overdetermination works here as well and makes the articulation of individual and political constructions always incomplete (Carusi & Szkuclarek, 2020). Here, educational practice is over-productive of cultural repositories of empty signifiers that can be used for diverse political constructions of identity (Szkudlarek, 2007; 2011).

The second is temporality: both politics and education are justified by imaginaries of the future and seek grounding or legitimacy in simultaneous constructions of the past, which thus erases and invalidates the present.

Those three grand constructions – (in)visibility, totality and temporality – are supported by numerous derivative strategies and rhetorical figures, like the rhetorical construction of values as empty signifiers; the work of copular metaphors where terms are linked bidirectionally by way of representation and grounding, which makes metaphors productive of literally material effects (Carusi, 2017); strategies of sanctification and profanation (e.g., in Rousseau, the child is natural, which in his theology means sanctified, and is profaned by pedagogical manipulation). Another is a pedagogical strategy of – as I call it – postulational rhetoric (Szkudlarek, 2019), where “should” statements invalidate that which exists and turn it into values – unattainable ideals that do not exist but oblige. This trope connects to the invalidation of the present and the production of empty signifiers.

Those figures and strategies are closely related. On the one hand, they result from the impossibility of construing a logical account (in the classical sense of logic, with the rules of consistency and the excluded middle) of what education is about. On the other, they reflect a similar impossibility of construing the subject of politics, i.e., the people (Laclau, 2005; 2014). If Carusi and myself are right, what results from these analyses is that education and politics operate together in the discursive construction of ontological layers of the social. They should, therefore, be analysed together when we try to understand social ontology. On the other hand, they should *not* be kept together if their disciplinary constructions are to be efficient, in performative terms, in the “ontic” layers of the social. As political *resp.* pedagogical in a common understanding of the terms, they need to develop their specific instrumental toolboxes that can support the discursive separation of childhood from citizenship, instruction from propaganda, schools from political rallies, etc., and thus, they must *deny* their rhetorical symmetry and shared ontology. This tension between ontological articulation and the demand for ontic, practical separation, seems to explain Rousseau’s strategies (1920; 1921) of making those connections “visible as invisible”, of their being spoken of and postulated as invisible. Interestingly, when Rousseau speaks of them together – and he needs to do it when referring to the ontological when he discusses the conditions of possibility of his particular political or pedagogical solutions – he tends to immediately distance himself

rhetorically from such contamination and denounces such connections as paradoxical, bizarre, etc. For example, he notes that the republic can only work when citizens love the country, and here is how this condition can be met, and how Rousseau says it and denies its rationality simultaneously:

How then is it possible to move the hearts of men, and to make them love the fatherland and its laws? Dare I say it? Through children's games; through institutions which seem idle and frivolous to superficial men, but which form cherished habits and invincible attachments. If I seem extravagant on this point, I am at least whole-hearted; for I admit that my folly appears to me under the guise of perfect reason (Rousseau, 1972, p. 2).

Theorising education and politics seems to operate in a mode of mutual separation and articulation, by way of certain parallelism, in an almost Cartesian way. They operate along similar lines, but we refuse to see their mutual interference, not even a common representation. As thinkers in education, we tend to keep education as pure as possible, faithful to the imperative formulated by Herbart that pedagogy should be thought of in its own terms and not be treated as a "remote tributary province" of other disciplines (Herbart, 1908 [1806]) – a demand that nowadays takes the form of resisting "the educationalization of social problems" (Smeyers, 2008). If we apply the discourse theory perspective to this theoretical field, i.e., if we assume that all is text and all objectivity is a discourse where relationships precede the construction of objects (Laclau, 2005), disciplines are no longer secure against multilateral contamination. What am I aiming at with this observation?

Using Laclau's (2005; 2014) theory of the political in analysing educational theories and practices, I take an ontological perspective. I read various discursive fields and regimes as contributing to the ontology of the social, and I see that it is for "ontic" (institutional) reasons that they strive to maintain their separation. Second, wherever I see educational and political theories resorting to rhetoric, I test whether such rhetorical openings relate to their need for grounding in the ontological, which they demand as their own foundations and which they must, therefore, construe themselves rhetorically. In particular,

in those rhetorical openings, I find gates to parallel realities of pedagogy *resp.* politics. Finally, I cannot avoid contaminating Laclau's theory and his conception of ontology with pedagogical questions. Seeking answers concerning education with tools borrowed from its political neighbour, I return those tools changed, scratched and bent by materials on which they were not meant to operate originally, and no longer capable of working as they used to. This is what I mean by turning the method of the discourse theory onto itself. After I used Laclau's theory in education, no longer can I read Laclau's account of the political discourse in its original shape. As long as (ontic) politics must operate along specific institutional logics, its ontological sense, i.e., its being driven by the desire for construing social totality and its rhetorical means to do that, open the field to the pedagogical. As long as pedagogy and politics must deny their mutual entanglements to be able to work separately, the pedagogical and the political appear to be transitive names of the same ontological space of necessity and impossibility of identity. Education, in this context, appears as "a tropological register of the social" (Carusi & Szkudlarek, 2020; Carusi & Szkudlarek, in press).

A discussion of the challenges such a pedagogical turn brings to Laclau's powerful theory, to its ontological as well as methodological layers, demands a separate and systematic analysis. One such issue is my observation that empty signifiers – the constitutive element of political identities – frequently use terms that have already been emptied of their particular meanings, and if we seek the location of such production of emptiness, we can see schools as factories of empty signifiers (Szkudlarek, 2007; 2011; 2013; 2016). In other words, Laclau's political ontology itself seems to presuppose the pedagogical as its condition of possibility.

What it means to the question of methodology addressed in this paper is that the notion of discourse, where texts are read as performative and therefore as political (constitutive of power relations, of social structures, etc.) and pedagogical (constitutive of common knowledge, of subjectivities, etc.) may collide with its own promise if – as in the first project reported here – we assume a layered ontology where individual learning, institutional arrangements of schools or workplaces, and their political milieus – or pedagogy, sociology

and politics – are treated as driven by separate disciplinary logics whereby they can only provide data or interpretative contexts one to another. However, in the last round of interpretations in the first project reported, we arrived at an ontological idea of “institutional pacts” between education and politics that remain invisible as long as their elements are stable and work (European Commission, 2005). The case that allowed us to identify their existence was that of a Norwegian university that decided to replace numerical grades in examination records with letters, which ruined the recruitment policies of lawyers’ offices where candidates applying for placement were ranked by the average of their university scores. The procedure worked fine with numbers but could not work with letters. This silent education – policy connection made us realise what we could have missed by being preoccupied with specific methodologies pertinent to the layered ontology of our discourse analysis scheme. Discourse ontology is insecure and seeking refuge in disciplinary borders and fixed methods “to follow” distracts us from seeing how fragile it is, and how negativity is always implicated in its operations.

Appendix

Methodological layout of discourse analysis in the *Journeymen* project.

Step One: Identifying Discourses	
Aim:	What discursive formations are discernible in the interview material?
Method:	Read the material for recurrent tropes, motifs, etc.; identify inconsistencies and contradictions in given interviews – they may reflect different positions and power structures
	Look for utterances that attribute given ideas to other than personal locations (e.g. in “why do you think so” and “how do you know” questions – hints that an idea has been adopted from family, peers, or that it reflects formal regulations, cultural patterns etc.)
	Look for discernible narrative structures in the material (e.g. sequences of events, “intention – obstacle – action” structures, etc.)

(continued)

Step Two: Institutional Analysis				
Aim:		Production	Distribution	Re-production
Method (for every discourse identified in the material)	Power	Who says what? What is the possible source of given ideas? What is the position of "discourse producer"?	How do these ideas spread? (<i>How do you know</i> questions, description of information policies, etc.)	What does the person think of that? What do these ideas "do" to the subject? What positions does he/she take in that discourse? Actor? "Sensor"? Object? What strategies are taken up?
	Legitimacy	What makes the idea valid / legitimate, interesting, etc.?	How are the rules (cultural patterns, values) spread? How does the person know that what "they" say is legitimate?	What does the person think of the <i>source</i> of these ideas – peers, officials, etc. – <i>saying</i> what they say? In other words, how does the person position her/himself in relation to that particular authority?
	Structure	What classifications, exclusions and hierarchies are made in the descriptive parts of the interview that pertain to the knowledge production – distribution – reproduction?	What restrictions to the access to various domains of knowledge / power can be identified?	What is accepted, what is modified, what is rejected by the person? Why does the person accept / modify / reject ideas, rules or values?
	Language	How are the aspects of production, distribution and re-production reflected in the language? Who uses active / passive voice? What are the means of expressing divisions and classifications? When is an "objective" and when a "subjective rhetoric applied? How are the aspects of positioning reflected in the language? What are the ways of expressing distance or proximity to certain aspects? How are pronouns (e.g. "I" vs. "we" vs. "they") used as means of positioning?		

(continued)

	Step Three: Analysing Socio-Cultural Contexts
Aim:	Identifying the connections of institutional discourses to broader socio-cultural discursive formations (ideologies, structures of argumentation, political orientations, cultural traditions, etc.)
Method:	Social hermeneutics: interpretation of the above data in the context of our own cultural competence ("members' perspective")
	Comparative analysis of cultural patterns identified in the analyses: the second round of interpretations

Source: Cackowska et al. (2023). *Freshmen Students on Education and Work. Work Package One Report: Poland*. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, p. 97.

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