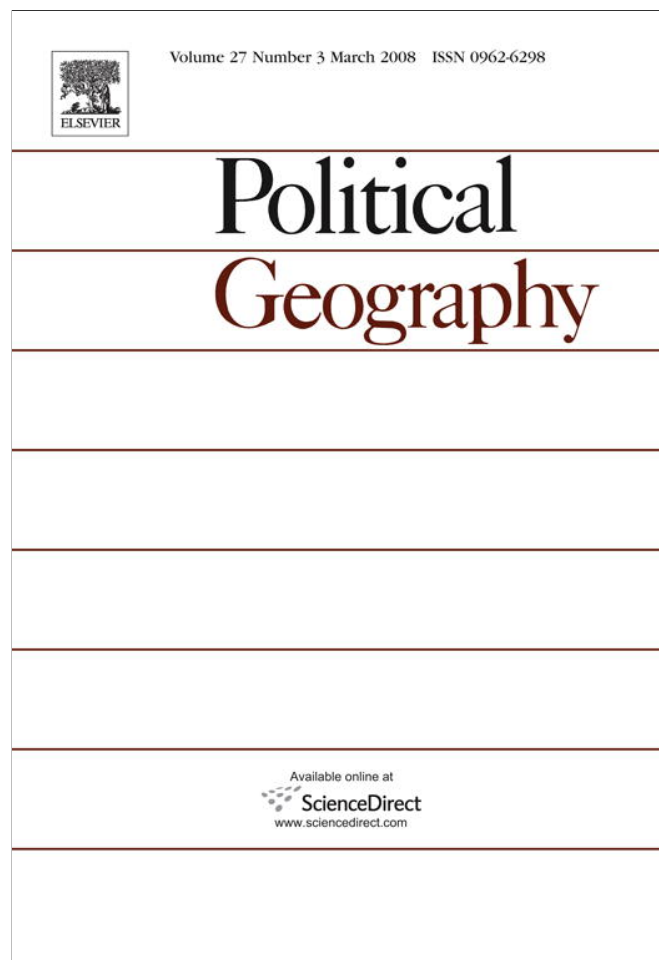


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# Reconsidering the concept of discourse for the field of critical geopolitics: Towards discourse as language *and* practice

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to advance the theoretical discussion on the concept of discourse in the field of critical geopolitics and address the growing dissatisfaction with its value as an instrument of social inquiry. It does so in a two-fold manner: first, it aims to contribute to conceptual clarity, particularly concerning the different applications of the concept of discourse in agency theory and poststructuralist critique, and second, by extending this initial groundwork, it urges a reconceptualization of the concept of discourse, which affords a broader view of the social. Drawing primarily on Michel Foucault's methodological archaeology, I problematize the way the autonomy of the subject has been conceptualized in discourse and argue in favor of dissolving the self-identical subject into multiple subject positions. Deriving from this argument the need for a clearer distinction between narratives and discourses, I then follow the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to conceptualize discourse not only as language, but also as language *and* practice. As I seek to demonstrate, this broader notion of discourse can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding and analysis of the discursive constitution of geopolitical identities, while retaining the critical edge that has become the hallmark of critical geopolitics.

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*Keywords:* Discourse; Poststructuralism; Critical geopolitics; Subject; Practice; Identity

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## Introduction

Starting from the assumption that classical geopolitical reasoning constructs, administers, and organizes space through language, critical geopolitics seeks to understand geography as imbued with power and to deconstruct the hegemonic fixations of spatial imaginations associated with it (Dodds & Sidaway, 1994; Ó Tuathail, 1994a, 1996; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). Geopolitics is seen as being about ‘that ideological process of constructing spatial, political and cultural boundaries to demarcate the domestic space as separate from the threatening other’ (Dalby, 1990b: 173). Adopting a constructivist perspective, critical geopolitics examines the very construction and social effects of geopolitical imaginations and geopolitical identities — the imaginary spatial positioning of people, regions, states and the shifting boundaries that accompany this positioning. Over time, literature on critical geopolitics has grown to encompass studies from a diverse range of settings, drawing on multiple sources. Projects range from macro scale analyses of how geopolitical imaginations frame world politics (e.g. Agnew, 1998) to smaller scale research, for example on the Ferghana Valley boundary dispute, with a focus on ethnographic methods (e.g. Megoran, 2004). Although it has drawn criticism on some facets of its work (e.g. Kelly, 2006; Müller & Reuber, in press; Redepinning, 2006; Roberts et al., 2000), critical geopolitics has proven hugely successful over the past two decades.

The concept of discourse has been at the heart of a critical geopolitics right from the beginning. A recent discussion forum on critical geopolitics (Murphy, Bassin, Newman, Reuber, & Agnew, 2004), as well as a special issue on the politics of geopolitical discourse (*Geopolitics*, 2006), attest to the fact that it continues to attract significant attention. Ó Tuathail (2004: 82) notes that “the concept of ‘geopolitical discourse’ is perhaps the one concept associated with critical geopolitics more than any other area of study.” It has particularly been popularised in the paradigmatic shift towards poststructuralism, which characterised the founding phase and key theoretical propositions of critical geopolitics (Dalby, 1991; Dodds & Sidaway, 1994; Ó Tuathail, 1994a; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992; Sharp, 1993). It then served to represent the indissoluble nexus between space and power in a notion that was succinctly summed up by Sharp (1993: 492): “Strategies of power always require the use of space and, thus, the use of discourses to create particular spatial images, primarily of territory and boundaries in statecraft, is inseparable from the formation and use of power.”

Despite recent bids for conceptual accuracy (Ó Tuathail, 2002, 2004), the concept of discourse in critical geopolitics appears to be relatively under-theorized and its theoretical breadth and depth remain largely unexplored. There is a tendency for discourse to become a catch-all term with only very vague notions of its conceptual underpinnings. What is more, besides discourse, a motley mixture of alternative terms abounds, the conceptual boundaries between which have become increasingly blurred — if they have ever been drawn. Alongside discourse we find terms such as “geopolitical storylines,” “geopolitical imaginations,” “geopolitical scripts,” “geopolitical narratives,” “geopolitical visions” and “geopolitical fantasies.” It is by now hard to distil a lowest common denominator that is shared across all the different usages we find in critical geopolitics. If anything, it is perhaps the assumption of what Jennifer Milliken (1999: 229) calls *discursive signification*, i.e. the communicative construction of meaning in a system of signification. While the vagueness of the concept of discourse may have contributed, to some extent, to its initial success in critical geopolitics, it also engenders a high degree of arbitrariness in the application of the concept to empirical material.

In addition to the vagueness of the concept of discourse, in recent years a growing discontent with its social reach in critical geopolitics research has been voiced. With the emergence of new

arenas of social inquiry in human geography, serious concerns have surfaced that the concept of discourse is too narrow to grasp “the little things.” “Some of the most potent geopolitical forces are [...] lurking in the ‘little details’ of people’s lives, what is ‘carried’ in the specific variabilities of their activities” (Shotter & Billig, 1998: 23), in the context of utterances (Thrift, 2000b: 384). Authors lament that the analysis of texts, the mainstay in the analysis of discourses in critical geopolitics research, frequently paints an incomplete picture and elides important sites of geopolitical production within institutions and at the local level (Mamadouh & Dijkink, 2006: 357; see also Paasi, 2000, 2006). A pre-occupation with elite representations and “an emphasis on discourse study means that these literatures are in danger of becoming both repetitious and lopsided, relegating or erasing people’s experiences and everyday understandings of the phenomena under question” (Megoran, 2006: 622).

In a bid to address both the increasing fuzziness in the use of the concept of discourse in critical geopolitics and the growing dissatisfaction with its value as an instrument of social inquiry, in this paper I will be concerned with two pivotal questions: first, what are the central theoretical dilemmas associated with the concept of discourse and its varied use in critical geopolitics, especially with regard to its claim to a poststructuralist epistemology? Second, how can we reconceptualize discourse in view of recent critique so that it affords a broader view of the social beyond the focus on texts and images, without giving up the critical notion that it is so closely tied to? This paper, therefore, situates itself as a contribution to widening the analytical focus of critical geopolitics to encompass social practice on the basis of a broader conceptualization of discourse but recoils from advocating a realignment of critical geopolitics with the principles of what has become known as non-representational theory. Mapping out such a position seems important to me in two fundamental respects. For one thing, it acknowledges the central role of practices as significant and signifying in the reproduction of discourses, rectifying the somewhat skewed emphasis on texts and images in critical geopolitics. For another, it continues to build on the political, critical edge of discourse theory – which has been the hallmark of critical geopolitics from its inception – to analyse the articulation, objectivization and subversion of hegemony. In this vein, I hope to bring critical geopolitics one step closer to an agenda which is “still based on discourse, but on discourse understood in a broader way, and one which is less taken in by representation and more attuned to actual practices” (Thrift, 2000b: 385).

My endeavour will initially lead me to an analysis of the concept of discourse as it was introduced and has since been applied to critical geopolitics, followed by an exploration of its tensions with a poststructuralist epistemology. In *Narratives, discourses and the autonomy of the subject and Discourse as language and practice*, I subsequently narrow my path of inquiry to two specific issues as they relate to the concept of discourse: the autonomy of the subject and the role of practice. Drawing on the writings of Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, I argue in favor of a greater awareness of the structural constraints on agency and, concomitantly, for the difference between narrative and discourse. Conceptualizing discourse as language *and* practice, in *The discursive constitution of geopolitical identities: implications for a critical geopolitics* I intend to show how this broader notion of discourse can be employed for a more holistic analysis of the constitution of geopolitical identities.

### **The concept of discourse in critical geopolitics**

In their key paper of 1992, Gearóid Ó Tuathail and John Agnew first laid out how a reconceptualization of geopolitics using the concept of discourse could look. They defined discourses

as “sets of socio-cultural resources used by people in the construction of meaning about their world and their activities” and as a “set of capabilities, an ensemble of rules by which readers/listeners and speakers/audiences are able to take what they hear and construct it into a meaningful organised whole” (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992: 192f, see also Dalby, 1990a: 7). Geopolitical discourse “is drawn upon and used by officials and leaders to constitute and represent world affairs” (Ó Tuathail, 2002: 607) in “[s]trategies of power [that] always require the use of space and, thus, the use of discourse” (Sharp, 1993: 492). “Global space is incessantly reimagined and rewritten by centers of power and authority” (Ó Tuathail, 1996: 249) through discourses that are historically constructed and imposed on people (Dalby, 1991: 276). A critical geopolitics is, therefore, called upon to deconstruct, unravel and expose discourses in order to lay bare the schemes of power operating beneath them (Dodds & Sidaway, 1994: 518; Ó Tuathail, 1992: 439).

In this definition of discourse and its role in a critical geopolitics, there are several aspects worth noting: first, the concept of discourse presented emphasises the autonomy of the acting individual. Individuals shape discourses, draw on them intentionally, and deploy them strategically to pursue certain ends. While individuals may face constraints on their agency imposed through discourses, they have manipulative control over the structural conditions for their action. Secondly, discourse is defined primarily as a socio-cognitive phenomenon. It is a concept that foregrounds “the people” and their communicative processes. Thirdly, with its focus on the construction of meaning, this concept stands in the broad tradition of Max Weber’s *Verstehenssoziologie*, a direction of sociology in the tradition of hermeneutics that explicates and interprets the processes and effects of social interaction in order to make sense of human behavior. This kind of interpretive-explanatory research tries “to reconstruct the tacit rules, the shared experience, and the collective knowledge of social actors. The reconstruction of meaning structures resists complete formalization and measurement but they are open to empathetic understanding (*Verstehen*)” (Angermüller, 2005: 4). This definition squarely establishes “discourse” as an actor- and action-oriented concept, locating it in the realm of the interpretive paradigm with clear references to social constructionism.

For the emphasis on human agency and how it shapes and draws on discourses, I will call the concept of discourse which evolved in the founding years of critical geopolitics the *agency concept*. In critical geopolitics, the agency concept has enjoyed widespread reception and has advanced to become somewhat of a “classic” defining concept for numerous empirical studies employing discourse to conceptualize geopolitics (e.g. Dalby, 1990a; Korf, 2006: 282; Kuus, 2002; Sidaway & Power, 2005: 531). While over the course of almost two decades and across a plethora of authors the verbatim definition has altered and the elite focus has given way to a broader interest in geopolitical representations (cf. Sharp, 1996, 2000), the focus on human agency through which actors draw on discourses *qua* representations as a means of acquiring power over space and pursuing specific interests has largely persisted (e.g. Ackleson, 2005: 166; Browning & Joenniemi, 2004: 339; Hollander, 2005: 339; Ó Tuathail, 2006).

For the varied use of the term agency (see Hays, 1994), especially vis-à-vis structure, it is necessary to briefly qualify what I mean by the agency concept of discourse. Such a concept does not deny or ignore the existence of constraints through discourse on human agency: “Rather than sovereign subjects having discourses, discourses constrain and enable subject positionings” (Ó Tuathail, 2002: 606). Much like Giddens’ (1979, 1984) structuration theory, it understands discourses as rules and resources that condition human action and weave together action and its constraints (e.g. Häkli, 1998: 337; Ó Tuathail, 2002: 605f; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992: 193; Sharp, 1993: 493). Therefore, by agency I do not mean a creative, unbound, and

unstructured component of human life, but I take it to explain the intentional creation, re-creation, and transformation of discourse, made possible by the enabling features of a discourse, while limited by the restraining features of a discourse. In marked contrast to the agency concept of discourse, structuralists see social phenomena as reflections of underlying structural determinants (Torfing, 1999: 137f). Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralism abolished the acting subject and understood it to be constituted entirely by what he called *langue* (language). From a structuralist point of view, discourses represent *langue*: they are largely invariant, fixed producers of meaning; and a reconstruction of the structures of these discourses constitutes the primary focus of analysis (in geography cf. Mattissek & Reuber, 2004; Rose, 2001: 137).

Over the years, within the agency concept of discourse in critical geopolitics, a range of different practical interpretations of the relationship between discourse and human agency have emerged, sometimes emphasizing the malleable aspect of discourse, at other times highlighting its constraints on human agency. The former is illustrated well in Ó Tuathail's (1992) study of the geopolitical reasoning of the Bush administration in 1989. The paper focuses on "the key national security intellectuals and the origins, formulation and articulation of their discourse about Gorbachev, the Soviet Union and the international system" (1992: 440). Figures from the political elite are depicted as purposely selecting certain discourses that buttress their political aims. By drawing attention to little-acknowledged facts, such as the influence of key figures from the Nixon–Kissinger camarilla in the Bush administration, Ó Tuathail seeks to interpret the motivation behind keeping up the representational regime of the Cold War into the 1990s. The meaning and intention of geopolitical discourses, their *what* and *why*, are at the heart of inquiries in his paper and clearly mark the interpretive-explanatory stance of his analysis (For more recent examples see e.g. Browning & Joenniemi, 2004; Hollander, 2005; Ó Tuathail, 2006).

From an epistemological vantage point, the adoption of the agency concept of discourse in the majority of writing in the area of critical geopolitics would point us towards a paradigmatic framework where the agency/structure dualism has been resolved in favor of agency through the primacy of the autonomous subject. While this renders the concept of discourse in critical geopolitics only loosely related to the writings of Foucault, from which it was originally derived (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992), it constitutes a valid epistemic proposition. Critical geopolitics, however, has generally been regarded as a poststructuralist enterprise by its proponents (e.g. Dalby, 1991; Dodds & Sidaway, 1994; Häkli, 1998; Ó Tuathail, 1994a, 1994b; Sharp, 1993). Although poststructuralism strives to map out an epistemological position which avoids the determinism of structuralism, in so doing it is also quite clear about denying the possibility of an autonomous subject. It is not the individual that structures and manipulates discourse but vice versa — discourses speak through the individual.

### **Narratives, discourses and the autonomy of the subject**

As the brief examples in *The concept of discourse in critical geopolitics* have served to underline, it is especially the question of agency that sits somewhat uneasily with a poststructuralist framework. Since the work of Michel Foucault is frequently invoked in support of a poststructuralist concept of discourse, in this section, I will specifically focus on his treatment of agency and the subject in discourses. Theory-building in critical geopolitics has frequently employed Foucauldian ideas (e.g. Dalby, 1991; Dodds & Sidaway, 1994; Häkli, 1998; Ó Tuathail, 1994a; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992; Smith, 2000). Predominantly, it has been

concerned with Foucault's work on power, taking up his idea of discourse as formative of social practice and of its being intricately tied up with the power/knowledge nexus: "[B]y examining the various narratives, concepts, and signifying practices that reside within geopolitical discourses, it would be possible to understand something of the power of those discourses to shape international politics" (Dodds & Sidaway, 1994: 516).

This pre-occupation with power, however, vitiates a more nuanced treatment of the subject, which plays a key but often neglected role in Foucault's work. In fact, Foucault stated that his work is frequently misread as being about power rather than about the different modes by which human beings are transformed into subjects (Foucault, 1982). Foucault uses the term "subject" in conscious contraposition to the concept of the acting individual, which occupies a prominent position in much work in critical geopolitics. In exploring his theory of the subject, I will primarily concentrate on the more formative concept of discourse he developed in his early work like *The Archaeology of Knowledge* or *The Order of Things*, which are often referred to as the "archaeological phase." To some degree, this early concept presents a continuity in Foucault's work, since he has never abandoned the archaeological approach even in his later genealogies (Howarth, 2000: 49f).

Contra agency, poststructuralist thought de-centers the acting individual and places an emphasis on the structural nature (though not determination) of discourse, its heterogeneity and contingency and how it produces the subjects of whom it speaks. Discourses are carriers of valid knowledge in the sense that nothing can acquire the status of knowledge without being subjected to a system of specific rules and constraints (Foucault, 1992). Speaking with Foucault, individuals can only acquire meaning if they identify themselves with the positions that discourses construct and thereby become subjects. The identity of the subject cannot be conceived independently of its inscription into discursive surfaces (Stäheli, 2000: 48) or the practices by which it constitutes itself (Bevir, 1999: 65). Thus, Foucault sees subjects as products and not as producers of discourses (Freundlieb, 1994; Hall, 2001: 79f; Rose, 2001: 137). He stresses that,

[o]ne has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework. (Foucault, 1980: 115)

Foucault's main objective is to "define a method of analysis purged of all anthropologism" (Foucault, 1972: 28). What constitutes the subject is an ensemble of structures that the subject can think and describe, but within which the subject is not sovereign, which it cannot alter. The subject is, therefore, an effect of structures and does not exist prior to them (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982). This process crystallises in Foucault's analytical focus when stating that he explores discourses:

not from the point of view of the individuals who are speaking, nor from the point of view of the formal structures of what they are saying, but from the point of view of *the rules that come into play in the very existence of such discourse*. (Foucault, 1970: xiv)

This act of decentring the subject from the analysis of discourse and conceptualizing it as a product of discourse lies at the heart of both structuralist and poststructuralist theory (Angermüller, 2001: 14). Contrary to exaggerated claims that poststructuralism does away with subjectivity *tout court*, it only denies the self-identical, autonomously acting individual (Stäheli, 2000: 48). What is crucial for Foucault is the point that individuals can only take meaning by subjecting themselves to discourse (But see the critique and other readings of

Foucault's theory of the subject, e.g. Bevir, 1999; McLaren, 1997; Taylor, 1989: 487–490). In this he concedes to the subject the possibility to take up certain subject positions that are regulated by different discourses. Insofar as a subject is positioned at the intersection of different discourses, its subjectivity may be articulated differently. However, this articulation does not happen intentionally. My peacetime identification as a father or worker yields to the identification with a nationalist subject position in times of war. Foucault holds that through the very act of declaring war I have been positioned differently by a war-nationalism discourse that I could neither consciously choose nor reject.

In this formulation of Foucault's early work, the discursive power to position subjects does not emanate from a fixed locus or from certain individuals. It cannot be traced back to its origin. Rather, it presents the condition of possibility of the social and comes from everywhere. The "who" of power and hegemony is, therefore, indeterminable — power cannot be owned, appropriated, or seized (see, for example, Allen, 2004; Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982; Foucault, 1982, 1986 [1976]; Torfing, 1999: 161ff.). Subjects only enact power without being the original source of it:

The key to the operation of this more amorphous form of power is said to rest with how the different schemas take hold in the imagination... The channelled meanings and dispersed strategies within any one institutional arrangement thus rely for their effectiveness on the extent to which people are mobilized and positioned through particular embedded practices. (Allen, 2004: 23)

Poststructuralism rejects that the hegemony of a particular discourse over others and, thus, the prevalence of a certain regime of representations can be conceptualized as the outcome of intentional choice, or that this hegemony can be challenged by intention. The structural constraints inherent in discourses may offer subjects several subject positions, but subjects are not free to occupy any position that can be imagined. If these subject positions are not articulated in a particular historical context, it is because a hegemonic discourse has positioned the subject in a way that excludes other subject positions. Poststructuralism, therefore, allows for the contingency of subject positions. That is, the fixation of the subject in one subject position by structural constraints is not total but merely partial.

At this point, it is worth delineating explicitly the difference between *narrative*, understood as assembled through texts, on one hand, and *discourse* on the other hand. It is a distinction crucially linked to the question of the autonomous subject, but seldom drawn. Representing a supra-textual level, narratives reflect the fact that texts — here understood to include both language and images — are not produced and consumed as self-referential containers but that every text manifests traces of other texts. This phenomenon of intertextuality is explained within the overarching narrative structure to which texts are subordinated. As shown in the [The concept of discourse in critical geopolitics](#), much of geopolitical writing starts from the assumption of the autonomous subject who has control over texts, knits them into narratives, and thus turns them into a vehicle through which it exercises power. Narratives are here associated with the agency of subjects as individuals. Individuals produce narratives. These narratives then become manipulated, usually by elites, as a strategic resource for pursuing certain interests.

In the classic understanding of critical geopolitics and its text-based take on discourses as narratives, texts constitute the fibres in the fabric of narratives. This pre-occupation with texts is evident in much of the empirical work, which has so far been carried out under the label of critical geopolitics: Dalby (1990a) draws on documents of the Committee on the Present Danger, Sharp (2000) on articles from Reader's Digest, Dittmer (2005) on newspaper articles,

Ackleson (2005) on elite speech acts and Dodds (1994b) on government records. In a similar fashion, maps and visual images can also function as texts and thus weave narratives. Zeigler (2002), for example, examines maps of Eastern European states and their role in supporting purposive narratives of nation-building and national identity. Culcasi (2006) looks at how and why maps of Kurdistan in the American print media represent Kurdistan in particular ways that reproduce and support US geopolitical primacy. In an analysis of visual representations of geopolitics Dodds (2007) narrows down on one cartoonist and highlights his role in mounting resistance to dominant geopolitical narratives through the intentional creation of subversive cartoons.

To be sure, this focus on texts and, concomitantly, on the largely autonomous subject has contributed tremendously to the success of critical geopolitics. It has, however, also incited critique from different sides, suggesting that it misses some important things: Megoran (2006) makes a methodological argument, speaking of a repetition of existing patterns that erases people's experiences and everyday understandings of the phenomena under question and consequently advocates a turn towards ethnography as a method complementary to discourse analysis. Thrift (2000b: 381) makes a conceptual argument, criticizing critical geopolitics for its "mesmerized attention to texts and images" and spells out the case in favor of increased attention to practices in the everyday making of geography. Anssi Paasi (2000, 2006) adds to this his critique of what he calls geopolitical remote sensing, an emerging tendency to observe and deconstruct discourses from a distance and out of context. As an alternative he suggests broadening the notion of "geo" to encompass local social practices in a kind of "everyday-life geopolitics." (cf. the discussion between Antonsich, 2006 and Moisio & Harle, 2006.) This idea also resonates with Dodds (2001: 473ff) when he advocates a critical geopolitics that is more attuned to everyday practices.

### **Discourse as language and practice**

Discourses as abstract forms of knowledge cannot be reduced to the merely linguistic element of being defined by a sum of constitutive, interrelated texts — of being narratives. If we are to move from the agency concept of discourse towards a poststructuralist epistemology, the autonomy of the subject must fade away as must the narrow conceptualization of discourse as narrative. Transcending Saussure, Foucault already paves the ground for abandoning the concept of the sign in favor of the concept of discursive practices and thus veers away from a purely linguistic conception of discourse. In this section, I draw on Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) theory of discourse for building on key elements of Foucault while furthering his concept of discourse in a number of important ways.

Laclau and Mouffe reject Foucault's inconsistent and weakly theorized distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices in their theory of discourse (cf. the critique in Howarth, 2000: 65f) and proffer a more comprehensive discourse concept that collapses the ontological difference between "the linguistic and the behavioral aspects of social practice" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 107). What makes Laclau and Mouffe's concept of discourse unique is its all-encompassing character in relationship to the social. For Laclau and Mouffe, the whole social space is engaged in the process of creating meaning and, therefore, is of discursive character (Laclau & Mouffe, 1990 [1987]: 100). A distinction between the discursive and the non-discursive is consequently rendered obsolete. Discourse refers both to linguistic and to extra-linguistic phenomena, to language and practice. Laclau and Mouffe use the example of the brick-layer to illustrate this central claim: I am building a wall and ask a workmate to pass me a brick which I

then add to the wall. The first act — asking for the brick — is linguistic, the second — adding the brick to the wall — is extra-linguistic but they are both partial moments of the totality of building a wall. This totality is what Laclau and Mouffe call discourse.

Laclau and Mouffe's concept of discourse makes possible a fuller comprehension of the social within discourse theory, sketching out avenues for a broader critical engagement with geopolitics beyond the confines of texts and images. While Foucault's idea of discourse stays conceptually vague regarding extra-linguistic practice, Laclau and Mouffe mend this blind spot in Foucault's theory. Their concept of discourse is closely related to Judith Butler's (1993) notion of performativity, which she develops out of a poststructuralist understanding of discourse and through which she conjoins practices, performances, texts and images. Building on key ideas from Austin's (1962) speech act theory, she conceives of performativity as "the reiterative and citational practice through which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler, 1993: 2). Butler operates within a broadly poststructuralist conception of discourse, which unites language and practice as forms of discursive signification and the creation of meaning (Stäheli, 2000: 63ff). She suggests that identificatory practices are neither structurally determined nor autonomously chosen but rather the articulation of a sedimented, naturalised discourse. The performance or enactment of identities offers conceptual leeway for subversive potential to challenge the discourses that underlie certain performances. In this vein, a more poststructuralist concept of discourse foregrounds the performance aspect vis-à-vis the purely textual aspect (Gregson & Rose, 2000).

The inclusion of social practice in the concept of discourse is the point where the difference between discourse on one hand and texts as narrative on the other hand starts to matter. The attention to practices implies a radical decentring of the subject as an active producer of discourses and dismisses theories of agency as a dispensable *explanans*. In contrast to narratives, human action is implicated and structured in discourse. In the practice of identification in which subjects engage, they are always-already limited to a number of subject positions that are the effect of discourse. Poststructuralism conceptualises discourse on a middle ground, avoiding the extremes of structural determination on one hand and autonomy of the subject on the other hand in the process of identification. Thus, the move away from intentionality and the autonomous subject ties in with and is a necessary condition for the nascent interest in practices and what Hayden Lorimer (2005: 84) has called the "more-than-representational" as a way of experiencing the world beyond agency-driven representations (On this point see also Kuus, 2007).

A concept of discourse reconceptualised in such a way as to include practice inevitably begs the clarification of its relationship with what in human geography has become known as non-representational theory (see, e.g. the reviews by Lorimer, 2005; Nash, 2000). Conceived as a deliberate counterpoint to discursive research, non-representational theory is concerned with pre-cognitive, bodily practices, including but not limited to the interrelated expressions of affect (e.g. Carter & McCormack, 2006; Ó Tuathail, 2003), the embodied practices of seeing and observing (e.g. MacDonald, 2006), feeling, hearing and so on. It is important to underscore, however, that the notion of practice and performativity, linking up to the discourse concept of Laclau and Mouffe and Butler, is distinctly different from practice as it is understood by advocates of non-representational theory. While within a discourse theoretical framework practice reproduces particular discourses through constant recitation and reiteration, the non-representational concept of practice foregrounds the lived experience and materiality of everyday human life beyond planned codings and constructed meanings to arrive at a rather different understanding of practice as the creative embodiment of the extra-discursive, pre-cognitive

aspects of the social (Thrift, 2000a; Thrift & Dewsbury, 2000). Such a stance, however, has drawn critique for being politically disempowering and blind to power geometries that impinge on affective registers (e.g. Nash, 2000; Tolia-Kelly, 2006 and the defence by Thrift, 2003). In a plea for saving the political edge of the analysis of practices, Catherine Nash (2000: 661) notes that “[e]xploring practices, performance, texts, object and images together rather than abandoning the knowable for the unknowable may be less theoretically ambitious than ‘non-representational theory’ but it is also more politically effective.”

This is where Laclau and Mouffe’s concept of discourse opens up a way of being mindful of everyday practices, while at the same time, not losing sight of their political effects. While their theory of discourse reaches its limits at the point at which geographical inquiry ventures into the realm of non-representative theory, it offers much in the way of critical political analysis. Supplementing Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe have embedded their concept of discourse in a theory of the political that allows thinking about hegemony as the fixation of contingent meaning within and through discourses. Unlike Saussurean structuralism, however, this fixation of meaning can always only be partial and the resulting closure is never permanent but merely temporary. Hegemony reduces the undecidable level of total openness to a decidable level of discourse that excludes other possible meanings (Torfing, 1999: 102). This excluded “surplus of meaning” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 111) is pooled in the *field of discursivity*, the totality of other meanings not articulated in a discourse. The field of discursivity is outside a particular discourse but not outside the discursive realm. Quite to the contrary, it embodies the discursive, the theoretical horizon for “the constitution of the being of every object” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1990: 105).

The field of discursivity represents the impossibility of any discourse to achieve a final suture, since every discourse is constituted in relation to the field of discursivity, which therefore holds the potential for disruption and subversion of the discursive meaning structures. Most importantly, the field of discursivity also symbolizes the radical openness of the social, which is a consequence of the “constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 113). This is how Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory conceptually responds to the poststructuralist challenge, which rebuffs the notion of a center and of the possibility of an ultimate fixation of meaning. From the poststructuralist indeterminacy, they infer the plea in favor of democratic pluralism (Smith, 1998; Stäheli, 1999). This position resonates with David Campbell’s (1994) vision of a progressive radical politics. Campbell argues that a politics which shows responsibility for the possibility and articulation of otherness must have at its heart the resistance against any form of oppression or exploitation. In this vein, he sketches the outlines of a postmodern ethics which is grounded in the unconditionality of difference.

### **The discursive constitution of geopolitical identities: implications for a critical geopolitics**

Laclau and Mouffe’s theory suggests a way of integrating social practice into discourse that goes beyond Foucault in proposing a not-only linguistic concept of discourse. In so doing, their concept of discourse addresses the call for a broader notion of discourse that overcomes the text-centred nature of much of critical geopolitics (Dodds, 2001; Megoran, 2006; Thrift, 2000b). The relationship between identity and geopolitics is one of the major themes in critical geopolitics, and the constitution of geopolitical identities is one area where this broader concept of discourse can find ready application (cf. Dijkink, 1996; Dodds, 1994a; Newman, 2000; Sharp, 2000; Sidaway & Power, 2005; also Campbell, 1992; Shapiro, 1988).

Laclau and Mouffe conceive of identity as the identification with a subject position in a discursive structure (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 115). Subject positions become identities when they are articulated in certain discourses. Identity is characterised by contingency, i.e. a given identity is one of many identities, a possible but not a necessary outcome. In their theory of discourse, Laclau and Mouffe in particular focus on the construction and contestation of identity in discourses through the articulation of hegemonic practices and antagonisms (see e.g. Howarth, Stavrakakis, & Norval, 2000; Howarth & Torfing, 2004; Laclau, 1994; Sutherland, 2005 for applications of Laclau and Mouffe's concept of discourse in the field of political science). This concept reflects particularly well that "geographies of identity are not fixed, but neither are they [...] infinitely in play and flux" (Radcliffe, 1998: 289). Similarly, Thrift (2000b: 384f) underscores the fact that identity and "an accompanying geopolitical stance are inscribed through the smallest of details," referring to the "constant hum of practices and their attendant territorializations within which geopower ferments and sometimes boils over." Critical geopolitics' traditional concern with texts at the expense of practice, however, has all but vitiated a holistic conceptualization of identity in its fullness, for identity "functions within discourse, but in so doing, it transgresses and erases the discursive/extradiscursive distinction" (Campbell, 1998: 25).

Attentiveness to social practice in research on geopolitical identities makes it easier to see what is often overlooked: that geopolitical identities are often contested and pluralized in places where a purely linguistic concept of discourse is conceptually blind. This is why the "analysis of discourse understood as the study of the preconditions for social action must include the analysis of practice understood as the study of social action itself" (Neumann, 2002: 627, 628).

[T]he analysis of texts and images with a geopolitical content may easily eclipse the political and it is easy to see why. Unlike the everyday situation in which authority is exercised (police, school, supervision at work) the exercise of a 'representational' force on masses or in international relations is difficult to pinpoint or visualise. (Mamadouh & Dijkink, 2006: 357f)

Let me illustrate my point by way of one example, which I draw from the rich literature on boundary studies. It is by now a truism that boundaries play a key role in the production of geopolitical identities (e.g. Paasi, 1998: 80ff). Several authors have attempted to demonstrate the richness of borderland identities beyond the textual aspects of geopolitical discourses by looking at the everyday lives of people living in border regions and how they contrast or resound with codified abstractions of geopolitical identity (e.g. Berg, 2000; Donnan & Wilson, 1999; Megoran, 2004, 2006; Paasi, 1998, 1999; Strüver, 2005). Paasi (1998, 1999) examines the case of the manifestation of the Finnish–Russian border in the post-Soviet age on which the opening of many border points and Finland's EU membership have wrought fundamental geopolitical changes. Conceptualizing social practice as separate from (linguistic) discourses, he aspires to understand how, through social practice and representations, borders become co-constitutive of identities. Representations of Finland's relations with Russia paint an ambivalent picture, on one hand underscoring Finnish sovereignty and its belonging to a common European space, and on the other hand trying to engage in sustained cooperation with Russia, bringing Russia into Europe. Paasi supplements the analysis of these representations with a look at the practices of cross-border interaction in one particular town that straddles the Finnish–Russian border and highlights how social and economic interaction between the Finnish and the Russian side has become increasingly diverse.

While being highly illuminating in its own right for its attention to the practice of cross-border interaction in the process of identity formation, Paasi's study falls somewhat short of recognizing the intertwined nature of local practices and supra-local representations. By understanding both practices and representations as different expressions of the same discourses, his study could have teased out more of the intersubjective meaning structures underlying both representations and practices. This is not to diminish the value of studies such as Paasi's but rather to highlight that by conceptualizing representations and practice, both as discursive phenomena, it becomes possible to open up a critical perspective on how representations and practices come together to position people differently in their identification vis-à-vis the Finnish–Russian border. How, for example, does the very act of crossing the Finnish–Russian border – the practices of border control, the different purposes for crossing the border as they relate to different social groups – interrelate with codified representations – official declarations, political speeches – of cross-border cooperation? Exploring the conjunctures and disjunctures of this positioning may point us towards a broader and more politically engaged analysis of the formation of geopolitical identities and give us a feeling for the creativity of everyday life. To this end, a concept of discourse in which language and social practice are conceptualized as equally formative of meaning hegemonies firmly keeps in its view the disciplining effect of codified, institutional representations, all the while being mindful of their translation into everyday citational practices at the local level.

Such a concept of discourse does not deny the centrality of representations in the media, in government documents or politicians' speeches as formative of identity. On the contrary, it recognises the disciplining hegemony of security or threat discourses, written across a plethora of sites, to produce compelling identifications for whole nations. But it is more attuned to the reworking, the performance of discourses within social groups within micro contexts. This performance can be a recitation of the already established knowledge, positioning the subject within certain discourses, but it can also result in a contestation, in asserting subversive difference. The enactment of identities often stages a show that is completely different from what the screenplay would prescribe and it gives us clues as to where seemingly hegemonic discourses are contested and subverted – and where they are reinforced. Looking at the performance of identities thus valorises the experience of the performers vis-à-vis that of the writers of the screenplay and thus supports the re-orientation of a critical geopolitics towards the everyday life of ordinary people. Such a popular geopolitics is less based on texts as a rather privileged form of representation, as “the end product of a series of state-centred, logical thought processes” (Carter & McCormack, 2006: 231), but on “ordinary and less-ordinary events, biographies, practices and encounters” (MacDonald, 2006: 68). With its integration of practice, Laclau and Mouffe's concept of discourse is particularly well poised to illuminate the “hidden and mundane acts of power that structure identities” (Dowler & Sharp, 2001: 166).

Much of this is present in Nick Megoran's (2004, 2005, 2006) ethnographic account of the 1999–2000 Ferghana Valley border crisis, which saw the sudden and violent enforcement of a strict border regime between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in an area where the presence of the interstate border had hardly been felt. Concomitantly, in Uzbek media, representations arose that drew on discourses of national strength and danger, further reinforcing the divisive effect of the boundary closure. In contrast, in Kyrgyzstan the social field had not been articulated by a hegemonic discourse in a comparative way and remained more open to varying inscriptions, offering multiple subject positions for identification. Megoran compellingly demonstrates the differential positioning of people that had been achieved by these discourses in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, respectively. However, he also gives evidence of how social practice in the

borderland communities had reworked and partly subverted the positioning effect of discourses, mounting a social antagonism that opened up the field of discursivity for articulations of geopolitical identities other than the hegemonic ones. Though unable to escape the formative effect of the hegemonic discourse, local practice had found ways of making the symbolic border “softer,” of transgressing and subverting the divisive logic of separate spaces which emanated from official, text-based narratives (Megoran, 2006).

In many ways, therefore, my endeavour to render discourse conceptually open for social practice overlaps with that of Megoran (Megoran, 2006, but see also Neumann, 2002 for similarities with the social practice debate in the field of international relations) who argues for more ethnographic research in political geography and critical geopolitics. We both agree that critical geopolitics has been overly pre-occupied with texts at the expense of other forms of human creation of meaning. He suggests connecting textual analysis to “theories of cultural reproduction such as embodiment and performativity” (Megoran, 2005: 575), among others, in order to broaden and deepen the work on discourse. However, while he argues in a later article (Megoran, 2006: 637) for a supplementation of discourse theory with other social theories and calls discursive analysis of texts and ethnographic investigation “complementary”, I advocate the consequential extension of the concept of discourse.

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to contribute to and further the theoretical discussion on discourse in critical geopolitics. Addressing recent critique relating to an overly textual focus of critical geopolitics, its main purpose has been to explore possibilities of broadening the social reach of the discourse concept along the lines of poststructuralist thought. It has started by examining the theoretical grounding and practical application of the “classic” agency concept of discourse, which emphasises the agency of the individual and the properties of discourses as strategic resources of representation and could, therefore, perhaps more aptly be called narrative. Assessing the programmatic drive towards a poststructuralist methodology in critical geopolitics, I argue that the agency concept of discourse as narrative does not adequately reflect the poststructuralist decentring of the subject and the contingency of discourses.

In an attempt to broaden the concept of discourse and align it with what can be considered key tenets of poststructuralism, I draw on Foucault’s effort to transcend the structure/agency dualism and to conceive of the subject as dissolved into multiple subject positions. This has important implications for a distinction between the two categories of narrative and discourse. Narratives, assembled through texts, are associated with the autonomy of the subject and intentional representations of geopolitical events, whereas discourse is always more than text, reflecting contextual, supra-subjective meaning structures that are not exclusively expressed by textual means. Thus, if we shift from an agency concept of discourse as narrative to a poststructuralist one, we also need to move away from the textualism that has characterised so much of critical geopolitical writing to an inclusion of practice in the concept of discourse. While already implicitly present in the body of Foucault’s writing, it is the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe which explicitly conceptualises practices as an integral part of discourse and in so doing opens up a fuller view of the social than is possible when drawing on Foucault alone. Specifically, it recognises that, while drawing on all scale levels, identities are situated productions that need to be analysed as such.

The integration of practice into discourse yields the potential to engage with more varied forms of social production beyond texts, while preserving the critical focus on hegemony as

a central element of critical geopolitical inquiry. In exemplary form, I have explored the implications arising from this broader discourse concept for the discursive construction of geopolitical identities, in and through the interplay of representations and practices that partially fix the meaning of identities by articulating them in the differential system of certain discourses. It is especially within the enactment of identities by ordinary people and in micro contexts that a concept of discourse as language *and* social practice can draw our attention to the little things that have too often been overlooked. Employing Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory to reconceptualize discourse in critical geopolitics opens up a new perspective for returning the concept of discourse to the centrality it enjoyed in a textually oriented critical geopolitics without confining its reach to an unnecessarily narrow fraction of the social.

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