Empirical Studies and Political Discourse Theory: A Critical Analysis of Resistance from an Organizational Perspective

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The purpose of the paper is to discuss issues to do with the practice and organization of resistance in concrete, empirical settings. We are both interested in the possibilities as well as the limits of, what has been called, ‘political discourse theory’ (PDT) in dealing with these issues. We have analyzed some empirical studies of resistance movements such as publications about the development of human rights movement in Argentina, about the resistance to airport expansion in the UK and about the South African Black Consciousness Movement. We recognize that there have been a range of writings in organization studies explicitly discussing and making use of Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of hegemony, exploring the ways of conceptualizing contemporary practices of organization and management and resistances to them. Although there are some exceptions to this rule, what is generally missing in organization studies debates of hegemonic struggles are concrete, empirical settings in which Laclau and Mouffe’s discursive framework is tested. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to put PDT to the test, by closely reading empirical studies, analyzing how they have dealt with the question of ‘organization’. We have read and analyzed these studies closely by identifying (1) the main theoretical categories that have been used; (2) the way these categories have been applied to the empirical studies; (3) the main analytical outcomes that have been put forward; and (4) the gaps or non-answered questions that we see in connection to the way resistance is organized in these empirical settings. In these empirical cases different concepts of political discourse theory were explicitly or implicitly used to explain and understand the success and failure of resistance, particularly concepts such as dislocation, empty signifiers, nodal points, and equivalential chains. In addition, our reading has revealed the importance of issues such as social networks and leadership. In our view, the PDT concepts have helped us and gone some way towards understanding the politics of the analyzed resistance movements. However, we have also noted a range of limits of PDT in understanding the grassroots organizational processes involved in these movements. We have highlighted a range of questions in terms of understanding in more detail the organizational dynamics involved in each resistance movement. Specifically, we discuss issues, such as decision making, leadership, communication processes, funding and work organization. In our view, these organizational issues are of great importance when trying to analyze the successes and failures of resistance movements. We hope our reading will be helpful for organizational researchers interested in applying political discourse theory to the field of organization studies, as we highlight the limits of PDT dealing with questions of organization. Equally, we hope to contribute to political discourse theory and the discussion about the organization of resistance by exploring some organizational dimensions that seem to be of vital importance when studying hegemonic struggles.
Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss issues to do with the practice and organization of resistance in concrete, empirical settings. We are interested in the possibilities as well as the limits of, what has been called, ‘political discourse theory’ (PDT) in dealing with these issues. For this purpose, we have analyzed some empirical studies of resistance movements carried out by academics of the Department of Government at the University of Essex, in order to discuss the strengths and weakness of the application of political discourse theory.

As our disciplinary background is organization studies, we are mainly interested in exploring ways of ‘operationalizing’ the discursive approach developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), as their work has received increasing attention in our field in recent years. Hence, there have been a range of writings in organization studies explicitly discussing and making use of Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of hegemony, exploring the ways of conceptualizing contemporary practices of organization and management, and resistances to them, from a post-Marxist and post-structuralist perspective (e.g. Contu, 2002; Contu and Willmott, 2003; Willmott, 2005; Böhm, 2006; Spicer and Böhm, 2007; Levy, 2007; Jones and Spicer, 2005).

However, what is generally missing in organization studies debates of hegemonic struggles are concrete, empirical settings in which Laclau and Mouffe’s discursive framework is tested – although there are some exceptions to this rule (e.g. Otto and Böhm, 2006; Contu, 2008). That is, what we have generally seen is a theoretical import of the ideas developed in political discourse theory to the field of organization studies without, however, testing the suitability of these ideas within concrete organizational settings, helping to inform the practical understanding of how hegemonic and counter-hegemonic movements are actually organized – and disorganized – on the ground.

According to Laclau (2000), political discourse theory is an alternative approach to the understanding of the structuration of social-political spaces by articulating a new conception of discourse and elaborating a theory of hegemony as the main framework of political analysis. In this sense, it is important to understand how the different discursive formations and the identities produced by them emerge and how they become hegemonic. For us, this question of how hegemony is forged cannot be answered without looking at the organizational dimension. Although within PDT the question of organization is never directly tackled, it is often implicitly acknowledged to be of great importance. According to Howarth and Stavrakakis (2000), for example, “issues of identity formation, the production of novel ideologies, the logics of social movements, the structuring of societies by a plurality of social imaginaries are central objects of investigation of discourse theory” (2000, p.2). Emphasizing the production and process of the construction of political ideologies, they hence indirectly acknowledge the organizational complexities involved in forging hegemonic relations.

The aim of this paper is, therefore, to put PDT to the test, by closely reading empirical studies carried out by political discourse theorists, analyzing how they have dealt with the question of ‘organization’. Concretely, we have engaged with a number of publications by Essex-based researchers, ranging from texts on the development of the human rights movement in Argentina, to papers on resistances to airport expansion in the UK and the South African Black Consciousness Movement. We have read and analyzed these studies closely by identifying (1) the main theoretical categories that have been used; (2) the way these categories have been applied to the empirical studies; (3) the main analytical outcomes that have been put forward; and (4) the gaps or non-answered questions that we see in connection to the way resistance is organized in these empirical settings.

Our analysis has revealed some open questions we have, which are informed by our background in organization studies and our empirical research interest in questions of the
Political Discourse Theory (PDT)
As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) argue, their discourse theory challenges the class reductionism and economic determinism of classical Marxism. By radicalizing Gramsci’s and Althusser’s reworking of Marxist conceptions of politics and ideology, and drawing upon post-structuralist critiques of language, the authors aim to deconstruct the Marxist ontology introducing a relational conception of discourse. In so doing, they argue that discourse theory conceives of society as a symbolic order in which social antagonisms and structural crises cannot be reduced to essential class cores determined by economic processes and relations (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). In this sense, “discourse theorists are not just concerned with the way in which social actors understand their particular worlds, but attention is focused more on the creation, disruption and transformation of the structures that organize social life” (2000, p. 6). Discourse theorists also reject rationalist approaches to political analysis and, instead, stress the historical contingency and structural impossibility of social systems, refusing to posit essentialist conceptions of social agency.

There are some important concepts and categories of analysis which are central to political discourse theory, including hegemony, antagonism, empty signifier, dislocation, identity, articulation, nodal points and logics of equivalence and difference. Let us briefly introduce them, as they will be of importance later on in our discussion.

According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), identity emerges from the articulation and re-articulation of signifying elements. This articulation can be seen as a practice establishing a relation among elements in such a way that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. Thus, discourse is considered the structured totality resulting from this articulatory practice.

Nodal points in political discourse theory are privileged signifiers or reference points in a discourse that unite together a particular system of meaning or ‘chain of signification.’ Thus, the articulation of a political discourse can only take place around an empty signifier that functions as a nodal point. In other words, emptiness is “revealed as an essential quality of the nodal point, as an important condition of possibility for its hegemonic success” (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000, p. 9). Nodal points are those privileged signifiers or reference points through which the rest of the elements of a discourse acquire their meaning, even if it is a partial fixation. It is also important to consider that this partial fixation will always involve a political struggle. Discourses compete for the construction and stabilization of meaning by articulating as many elements as possible around certain privileged points. In this way, the resulting meaning will be always a ‘political’ fixation that will involve ‘winners’ and ‘losers’.

The construction and experience of social antagonisms are central for political discourse theory. Antagonisms are evidence of the frontiers of a social formation. As Howarth and Stavrakakis (2000) put it, antagonisms show the points where identity is no longer fixed in a differential system, but is contested by forces which stand outside or at the very limit of that order. Social antagonisms occur because social agents are unable to achieve fully their identity. In this sense, the task of the discourse analyst is to explore the different forms of this impossibility, and the mechanisms by which the obstruction of identity is constructed in antagonistic terms by social agents. It is through the constitutions of antagonisms and the
drawing of political frontiers that the production of discursive formations – by extending all social and political identities – may take place.

Laclau and Mouffe (1985) introduce the concept of the ‘logic of equivalence’ in order to theorize the idea that an identity cannot be integrated into an existing system of differences. The logic of equivalence functions by creating equivalential identities that express a negation of a discursive system. In Howarth and Stavrakakis’s words, “it functions by splitting a system of differences and instituting a political frontier between two opposed camps” (2000, p. 11). Equivalence operates by dissolving the differential character of identities within a system and by creating a negative identity which is perceived as a threat to them. “If the logic of equivalence functions by splitting a system of differences and instituting a political frontier between two opposed camps, the logic of difference does exactly the opposite. It consists in the expansion of a given system of differences by dissolving existing chains of equivalence and incorporating those disarticulated elements into an expanding order (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000, p.1).

The category of dislocation refers to the process by which the contingency of discursive structures is made visible. According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), on the one hand, dislocation events threaten identities, on the other, they are the foundation on which new identities are constituted. In other words, if dislocations disturb identities and discourses, they also create a lack at the level of meaning that stimulates new discursive constructions, which attempt to ‘fix’ the dislocated structure. In short, it is the failure of the structure – and, as we have seen, of those subject positions which are part of such a structure – that compels the subject to act, to assert anew its subjectivity (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000, p.13).

Since the early writings of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), political discourse theory has produced an extensive theoretical apparatus, which is sometimes referred to as the ‘Essex school’, given that most of its proponents have been based at the University of Essex (UK) in some way or another over the past quarter of a century. Today, Laclau’s ideas are mainly advanced by scholars that have been based at Essex’s Department of Government, at which political discourse theory is very much thriving (e.g. Norval, 2007; Glynos and Howarth, 2007).

Although a lot of theoretical work has emerged out of the ‘Essex school’, there have also been a number of significant empirical studies undertaken by staff and students of the Department. We have therefore selected some of these studies that, in our eyes, can be considered exemplary, in order to read them from the perspective of scholars interested in questions of the organization and practice of resistance.

Applying political discourse theory: Three empirical cases

For the purpose of our analysis we have selected the following papers: Howarth’s (1994, 1997, 2000) reading of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in South Africa, Griggs and Howarth’s (2000, 2004, 2008) analysis of resistance movements against airport expansion projects in the UK, and Barros’ (2008) engagement with the historical emergence of the human rights movement in Argentina. For each of these cases we are going to outline the authors’ arguments, discuss the main concepts used, investigate how the success or failure of the resistance movement is explained, explore what we learn about the organization of resistance, and finally summarize the open and remaining questions we have.

The rise of the human rights movement in Argentina

Barros (2008) presents her work about the development of the human rights movement in Argentina in a PhD thesis entitled ‘The emergence and constitution of the human rights
movement and discourse in Argentina’, published by the Department of Government at the University of Essex in 2008. According to the author, the thesis accounts for the emergence and constitution of the human rights movement and discourse during the last military dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983). According to her, the movement’s emergence and constitution should be understood as the result of a contingent process of political articulation. In her own words, “the thesis seeks to explain how the dislocatory effects of the illegal repression unleashed by the military regime, along with the generalised paralysis and silence of the main social and political forces provoked a temporal suspension of meaning that eventually forced the appearance of a new form of political identification” (Barros, 2008, p.2). This new political identity, constituted around the defence of human rights, was made possible by the engagement of the affected groups in a range of different social and political practices through which the relatives of the ‘disappeared’ could relate to each other and identify the similarity of their individual cases as well as represent themselves in a common way. This process was aided by an increasingly available human rights discourse that was imported to Argentina from abroad. The availability of this discourse allowed the articulation of the claims for the ‘disappeared people’, for truth and justice around the central notion of human rights and the gradual identification of the relatives of the victims with the human rights cause and struggle. By applying the concepts of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, such as articulation, nodal points, social antagonisms, political frontiers, myths and imaginaries, Barros develops an account of the human rights movement and discourse, which, according to her, explains the way this new political identity around the defence of human rights was actually formed and constituted.

Resistance against airport expansion in the UK

From Griggs and Howarth’s longstanding research project on the analysis of resistance movements against airport expansion in the UK we have selected three papers. In ‘New environmental movements and direct action protest: The campaign against Manchester Airport’s second runway’, the authors (2000) argue that this case shows that, for the first time in Britain, two very different groups got together to fight a common struggle: fairly conservative local residents, on the one hand, and more radical direct action protesters, on the other. The anti-airport expansion campaign began on 29 July 1997 when Manchester Airport announced plans to build a second runway, and then continued in three phases. The first phase occurred when KAMJAG (Knutsford and Mobberley Joint Action Group) and MAJAC (an umbrella organization – Manchester Airport Joint Action Group) took the lead in the public consultation, preparing the submission of local residents to the public inquiry. The second phase starts with the public inquiry in June 1994, lasting until January 1997 when the inspector decided in favour of the new runway. Then the third phase was initiated with the final campaign of direct action, when green activists established camps on the proposed construction site less than ten days after the pro-runway decision. The authors aim to answer three questions in this paper: How did local residents’ groups and direct action protesters overcome their collective action problems, and how successful were they in doing so? How is it possible to characterize the alliance that was established between them, and how can we explain its emergence and formation? Finally, how can we account for the failure of the campaign and the overall effects on the participants of the protest?

In the article ‘A transformative political campaign? The new rhetoric of protest against airport expansion in the UK’, Griggs and Howarth (2004) are interested in explaining how and why in this precise ideological and organizational form, the anti-airport expansion movement continued to renew itself in the face of persistent defeats. Thus, they present an analysis of HACAN (Heathrow Association for control of Aircraft Noise) ClearSkies, a local
airport protest group, which has challenged the dominant ideology governing British aviation policy by articulating a new rhetoric of environmental protest. According to the authors, we can discern two basic periods in the organization’s activities: a first phase in which the group adopted the strategies and tactics associated with a typical NIMBY organization which was consonant with its members’ identities and interests; and a second, qualitatively different, stage in which there was an attempt to construct a broad-based ‘anti-airport expansion’ coalition built around the signifier ‘demand management’. For Griggs and Howarth (2004), in this case we can witness the emergence of a transformative campaign strategy that extends the particular struggles of HACAN ClearSkies to stop the expansion of Heathrow Airport to a more universal struggle aimed at countering airport expansion in the Southeast of England and across the UK and Europe as a whole.

In ‘Populism, Localism and Environmental Politics: The Logic and Rhetoric of the Stop Stansted Expansion Campaign’, Griggs and Howarth (2008) explore the different ways in which physical planning issues become sites of political struggle and negotiation. The paper specifically is concerned with the relationship between what is called the paradox of political engagement, which emanates from a tension between particularity and universality in political campaigning. The struggle they analyze emerged in 2002 in response to the New Labour government’s consultation exercise to determine the future of aviation in the UK. Their analysis focuses on the publicly articulated discourse, especially the rhetorical strategy, employed by the Stop Stansted Expansion (SSE) leadership in its campaign statements and documents. Building especially on the work of Laclau (2005a, 2005b) on populism, they develop a grammar of concepts and logics with which to understand the dynamics of political mobilization and their relationship to specific policy outcomes. The paper examines the difficulties of constructing a populist form of politics to advance environmental demands and interests.

South Africa’s Black Consciousness Movement

Over the past decade or so Howarth has engaged in an analysis of the emergence of South Africa’s Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), which has been published in a variety of journals, books, as well as his own PhD thesis. In ‘The difficult emergence of a democratic imaginary: Black consciousness and non-racial democracy in South Africa’, Howarth (2000) analyzes the failure of the BCM discourse to transform the myth of black solidarity and black communalism into a mature social imaginary, joined with the consolidation of Charterism as the leading internal opposition discourse. He raises and discusses four basic questions in the paper: Why did the BCM fail? What was the character of Charterism, and how did it become hegemonic? How can we account for the transition between the two discourses? He begins his work by examining: the different material contexts of domination that emerged after the Soweto events of June 1976 in South Africa, a context marked, according to him, by the organic crisis of the apartheid regime. He then examines the failure of the BCM to impose its vision of society by constituting itself as a viable social imaginary. Finally, he turns to those resistance currents that did not occupy the new political spaces opened up by the reformist discourse of the period.

In ‘Complexities of identity/difference: black consciousness ideology in South Africa’, Howarth (1997) pursues three main aims: 1. to contest what it has been called the dominant interpretation of Black Consciousness in South Africa, which has reduced its ideology to little more than a particularistic politics of difference; 2. to explicate an alternative understanding of the movement and its ideology by examining the different discursive practices through which black identity was constructed; and 3. to draw out the theoretical, and possibly ethical, implications of this alternative understanding for questions surrounding discourse theory, the
critique of ideology and the politics of identity/difference. The author uses papers, presentations and articles offered by different leaders of the movement to sustain his analysis. The main source used is a movement leader called Biko, but he presents ideas from other intellectuals of the movement as well.

All of these analyses are based on important concepts of the political discourse theory presented by Laclau and Mouffe (1985). The main ones that we can note are: dislocation, identities, empty signifiers, as well as antagonisms, interests, myths and social imaginaries, political frontiers, enemies and friends. Some of these concepts are more emphasized in one work than in another, but generally all of them are dealing with them to some extent. Let us now turn to an analysis and conceptual evaluation of these empirical cases.

Analyzing the cases: Important dimensions of resistance

In all of these cases resistance can be understood in relation to the concepts of dislocation and the construction of empty signifiers, which are both used to explain how equivalential chains are built and new identities of resistance group are forged.

Dislocation

As we already mentioned, ‘dislocation’ can be considered a key concept for political discourse theory, naming events or crises that cannot be represented within an established discourse. Instead, they function to disrupt and disestablish discursive orders. For Barros (2008, p.42), for instance, the human rights groups emerged in Argentina as a result of a situation experienced as a dislocation. For her, the military discourse and other discourses available under the last military dictatorship failed to symbolize the events provoked by the unprecedented illegal repression carried out by the regime. This failure was showing its de-structuring effects on numerous families and groups of society that were affected by the kidnapping of one or several of their members. After an endless search these families were exhausted and incapable of carrying on within the hegemonic discourse, despite all their attempts of making sense of the experience they were living in. Barros states that it was this absence or suspension of meaning which forced these people to attempt to re-articulate the dislocatory effects of repression such that this re-articulation provided them with a new principle of reading, allowing them to make sense of the new situation and coming to terms with their own experience of absence and lack.

In the case of HACAN ClearSkies, Griggs and Howarth (2004) say that besides organizational expansion the resistance group had experienced some dislocatory events, mainly related to the disappointments with public inquiries since the struggles against the 4th and 5th Heathrow terminals. For Griggs and Howarth, this is a positive response to crises and dislocations, allowing the organization to constantly regenerate itself. The authors argue that this regeneration is enacted by the leadership and members of this resistance group, developing new strategies and practices, or new discourses, so as to transform themselves in different circumstances. According to the authors, KACAN was led initially by ‘upper-class residents’ and adopted traditional forms of campaigning, such as writing to ministers, lobbying MPs and using whatever influence its members had in ‘the corridors of power’. In an attempt to combat the perceived failings of this traditional style of political engagement, HACAN’s subsequent contestation of official public inquiries reflected a decision by its leadership to participate in a new arena of politics. The dislocatory experiences of participation, particularly the inquiry into the building of the 5th Terminal at Heathrow, bankrupted this style of campaigning. Seeking to make sense of the perceived failure of the Terminal Five Inquiry, the new leader of the organization advocated that public inquiries
should be viewed as ‘part of a wider campaign’, and that HACAN ClearSkies should take the campaign to government, ‘campaigning on our territory, not theirs’. This meant a strategy of community action and media stunts.

In the case of Manchester Airport’s second runway, Griggs and Howarth (2000) talk about two dislocation moments: the first one occurred in 1991 with the announcement of building the second runway; the second dislocation moment, probably the more important one, happened in 1997 when the inspector decided in favour of the new runway. As the authors put it, with the second ‘disappointment’ the campaign shifted away from traditional lobbying politics of local residents to the language of technical expertise and knowledge required by the public inquiry. But “It was the failure of the Inquiry to endorse the claims of local residents that finally dislocated the group identity of local residents and initiated the final campaign of direct action (a kind of strategy which was available at that moment)” (Griggs and Howarth, 2000, p.56).

In the case of BCM, the Soweto uprising is regarded by Howarth (2000) as a dislocatory experience, a key moment in the struggle against apartheid, a moment of reinterpretation. According to him, there was a significant different material context of domination that emerged after the Soweto events of June 1976, a context which was marked by an organic crisis of the apartheid regime. According to Howarth (2000), the organic crisis of the state was related to a range of contradictions that were fused together by the Soweto events: the 1970s had brought a major transformation in the geopolitical context of the Southern African region; a series of economic difficulties became more prominent during the period; the intensifying disintegration of the key barriers separating blacks into a group of permanent ‘urban insiders’, on the one hand, and a set of rural outsiders living in the independent homelands and Bantustans, on the other; the reliance on increasing doses of state coercion and repression; and all these logics were exacerbated by the growing popular and working-class struggles of the time. This crisis therefore brought the limitations of the dominant discourse to the surface, allowing a space for the search for alternatives.

Identity
The concept of identity and the role it has of building cohesion inside a group, thus creating conditions for a stronger counter-hegemonic struggle, is something we could see developed in many of the papers we analyzed. As Howarth and Stavrakakis (2000, p.9) put it, discourses and the identities produced through them are inherently political entities that involve the construction of antagonisms and the exercise of power.

In the case of Manchester Airport’s second runway, for example, Griggs and Howarth (2000) identify very clearly the exogenous and endogenous identity of both groups involved in the campaign as a key issue. According to them, local residents had an exogenously defined identity insofar they were all affected by the disruption, pollution, concerns about their community’s quality of life, and lack of consultation engendered by the new construction project. This identity, for them, facilitated the initial tasks facing group leaders to mobilize local support, since organizers and political entrepreneurs of the potential groups could target their campaign on those most directly affected by the airport’s decision. According to Griggs and Howarth (2000), the identity of ‘green’, direct action activists as a group was also an important issue to understand this campaign. For the authors, they had an endogenous group identity, which meant that their collective action problems had to be overcome by soft incentives, such as expressive and participatory benefits. The reproduction of their identity required constant campaigning and the production of ‘enemies’ to reinforce their militant values and lifestyles, something that is in line with Laclau and Mouffe’s approach to understanding hegemonic struggle. In this sense, the building of the second
runway enabled direct action protesters to reproduce and reconstruct this identity through new protests.

The authors also explain the way these two identities were forged together during the campaign. Both of them, eco-warriors and local residents, were presented as equally threatening to the airport and its interests, creating a degree of identity between the two groups. They were perceived by pro-airport spokespeople as ‘anti-airport’ and ‘anti-progress’, which labeled them as enemies. The media also helped creating this kind of perception, creating two camps; on one hand, local residents and eco-warriors, and, on the other, the pro-airport lobby. Even though these identities and practices helped to forge these two groups together during the campaign, we can also say that the differences between them reinforced the difficulties of establishing something more permanent or deep between them, especially during the third phase of the campaign.

For Barros (2008), too, identity plays a significant role, especially in her discussion of how the ‘enemy’ and ‘other’ is constructed by the human rights movement in Argentina. During this process the groups of relatives of the ‘disappeared people’ began to draw an antagonistic frontier through which those who denied the truth about their missing husbands, daughters and sons were radically excluded from the domain of the legitimate. The side beyond the frontier was more and more discursively constructed as that which blocked the identity of numerous families/mothers/wives of the country. Thus, it was on the basis of this increasing identification and representation of the military regime as the main source of the feelings of distress, anger, absence and uncertainty, that the identity and discursive unity of the relatives’ groups was achieved (Barros, 2008, p.39, 40).

Social networks and the logic of equivalence

In each case these new identities were important elements in terms of establishing (or not) equivalent chains with other groups or organizations. According to Howarth and Stravrakakis (2000: 11), the logic of equivalence functions by creating equivalential identities that express a clear negation of a discourse system. It functions by splitting a system of differences and instituting a political frontier between two opposed camps. In this sense, it is possible to recognize the importance of social networks or coalitions that were described in the articles. This is probably more emphasized in the campaigns against airport expansion than in the other two cases (BCM and Argentina). The networks that were established in the Manchester second runway campaign (Griggs and Howarth, 2000) between local residents, local activists, media, local authorities and other groups, and in the Heathrow case (Griggs and Howarth, 2004) through the process of naming and establishing new coalitions amplifying the number of organizations involved in the campaign, were important issues developed in the papers, explaining each struggle. In the Argentinean case (Barros, 2008), however, the importance of social networks was not so clear, even though we can guess that they probably existed, for example, in terms of connections with formal human rights organizations, international human rights movements and with the local media. In the case of BCM in South Africa (Howarth, 1997, 2000) social networks as a topic were weakly noticed.

In the case of Manchester Airport’s second runway (Griggs and Howarth, 2000), the leaders of local associations were instrumental in the formation of KAMJAG and MAJAG, the umbrella organizations that represented all ten local villages at the public inquiry. Leaders of MAJAG were identified as local councilors or prominent members of the village communities, able to call upon support not only of politicians and local authorities, but also professional people (lawyers, architects and risk consultants) who committed substantial expertise and resources to the campaign. For Griggs and Howarth, these links lowered the costs of the campaign, and also provided the campaign with important policy brokers.
Similarly, on the side of the green activists, the rapid mobilization of them in Manchester “owed much to prior existence of institutionalised networks of green activists in South Manchester. The Campaign Against Runway 2 brought together the different cultures and strategies of Manchester Friends of the Earth and the environmental activities of Earth First, the Green Party and Manchester Wildlife, as well as the Manchester Airport environment Network” (Griggs and Howarth, 2000, p.59) According to the authors, this diverse network of environmentalists was crucial to the mobilization of militant green activists, as the pre-established social networks which structure the green movement were exploited to trigger the flood of activists into the Bollin valley.

In the case of HACAN ClearSkies (Griggs and Howarth, 2004), the whole 35 years of the organization’s history shows the importance of alliances in the development of new political strategies. In 1999 HACAN merged with ClearSkies to become HACAN ClearSkies. After some moments of success and many failures, the new leader of the joint organization started openly to talk about a parallel strategy that aimed to bring together a wide-ranging coalition to act as a counter-balance to the pro-airport lobby. This medium was Airport Watch, which was launched in July 2002. Opposing airport expansion across the UK, Airport Watch brought together local airport protest groups with national environmental and conservation lobbies such as the Council for the Protection of Rural England, Friends of the Earth, Transport 2000 and many other important organizations in the field. For Griggs and Howarth, this new strategy aligned to these new coalitions gave HACAN ClearSkies more strength in its struggle.

Although there is some ambiguity about the politics of the SSE campaign (Griggs and Howarth, 2008), here we can also observe the importance of social networks and the establishment of coalitions. Griggs and Howarth (2008) say that after the government announcement of the consultation exercise to determine the future of aviation in July 2002, within two weeks, the local residents association had joined forces with parish councils, Friends of the Earth (FoE) and other environmental groups to launch Stop Stansted Expansion (SSE). As the authors affirm, emerging from the social and political networks of NWEEHPA, SSE was able to call upon established networks of community activists, including ‘professional political lobbyists, professional and experienced environmental campaigners and barristers etc.’ It is also important to say that, as the campaign developed, the SSE leadership also wanted to make links with the more populist discourse forged by other protest groups opposed to the proposed expansion of airports outside the Stansted region. At its first meeting, the campaign group acknowledged the existence of, and recognized the need to establish close links with, other protest groups at Heathrow and Gatwick. And during the period of consultation leading to the 2003 White Paper, and beyond, SSE participated in a number of joint actions with other local campaigns.

Leadership

Within these social networks many cases highlighted the role of leaders and political entrepreneurs who, during the dislocation moments, were identified to build new identities and equivalential chains between antagonistic groups. Even though this is not a concept we see directly developed by those who work with political discourse theory, it seemed an important issue in almost every case.

In the case of Manchester Airport’s second runway (Griggs and Howarth, 2000), local political entrepreneurs were considered important policy negotiators and had central roles throughout the campaign of direct action, as they provided logistical support from Manchester Friends of the Earth’s office, and were a focal point for dealing with press inquiries, holding meetings and coordinating responses to the actions of the pro-airport lobby. The authors also
highlight the role Jeff Gazzard played, a local resident initially associated with MAJAG. He acted as the chief coordinator for the campaign against the second runway. Being a critical pivot between the differently oriented groups, he legitimized the roles of the different groups involved by coordinating the all-important media coverage of the events at the local and national levels. Waite was another important leader in the case, in terms of forging links between local residents and green direct action activists. Even though the authors point to the importance of these leaders for developing the campaign, they also call attention to some failures in this respect. One could argue that the identity of the local residents was, in fact, dislocated, and that the absence of strong political entrepreneurs failed to engender a new process of identification, establishing long lasting links to a range of anti-airport movements in the UK and beyond.

When Griggs and Howarth (2004) talk about the history of HACAN ClearSkies and the transformative political campaign they adopted, the authors implicitly highlight the importance of leadership for adopting a new strategy. Although the authors do not empirically or theoretically expand on the topic of leadership, it seems clear to us that the new leadership of the resistance group is said to have been an important factor for articulating a new political ideology and strategy. In a similar way we can note the importance of leadership in Griggs and Howarth (2008). For the authors, the SSE leadership firmly embraced the logic of oppositional politics, mobilizing local communities to raise the perceived political costs of expansion at Stansted and make additional development of the airport politically unacceptable both for the government and the British Airports Authority (BAA).

Empty signifiers

The possibility of achieving equivalential chains between different organizations within social networks is connected to the development of empty signifiers. According to Howarth and Stavrakakis (2000), the articulation of a political discourse can only take place around an empty signifier that functions as a nodal point. As they say, “nodal points are those privileged signifiers or reference points through which the rest of the elements of a discourse acquire their meaning. Even if it is a partial fixation, it is also important to consider that this partial fixation will always involve a political struggle. Discourses will compete for constructing and stabilising meaning by articulating as many elements as possible around certain privileged points.” (Howarth and Stravrakakis, 2000, p.37).

In the process that the human rights movement went through in Argentina the development of this concept could be seen very clearly. According to Barros (2008), the groups of relatives of the ‘disappeared’ in Argentina started to articulate their claims for the ‘disappeared people’ around the signifier human rights, which then began to occupy the place of the nodal point. Thus, the author demonstrates how the relatives’ claims for truth, security and justice were transformed into internal moments of the discourse of the defence of human rights, and their meaning was then partially fixed by reference to that nodal point.

The difficulties of establishing a common signifier between local residents and green activists was considered by Griggs and Howarth (2000) an important reason for the failure of the protest action during the third phase of the campaign against Manchester Airport’s second runway. According to them, even though the groups worked together during the final phase of their struggle, the opposition was weak, carrying no positive identification with which to articulate a collective will between the two groups.

We do not find the same situation in the HACAN ClearSkies case. For Griggs and Howarth (2004), what we have witnessed is the emergence of a transformative campaign strategy that extends the particular struggles of one organization to stop the expansion at Heathrow to a more universal struggle countering airport expansion in the Southeast of
England and across the UK and Europe as a whole. They say that the wider demand for social justice developed by the organization supplemented the usual NIMBYism and environmental orientations of anti-roads and anti-airports campaigning.

In the SSE case, this strategy of reaching out to different groups in the struggle against airport expansion was not successful. It seemed the SSE group resisted a truly common struggle, even though there was a rhetoric that could have made it possible. As the authors put it, the logic of linking demands together into an equivalential chain involved the production of ‘empty signifiers’ – signifiers such as ‘freedom to fly’, ‘sustainable aviation’, or ‘demand management’ – with which different people could identify but in the end did not.

The BCM case in South Africa (Howarth, 1997, 2000) is an example of another failure for developing these empty signifiers and building an equivalential chain among different groups. It seemed that there was an attempt to build around the signifier ‘black’ a common idea that would bring unity among groups. As Howarth (2000) puts it, apart from the demystification of false universals, and the mobilization of a universal humanism to ground a critique of white domination, and to provide a positive alternative to it, a final mediation between the universal and the particular centred on the function of the signifier ‘black’ itself was necessary as an attempt to develop links between different groups. However, Howarth (2000) shows that the transformation of ‘blackness’ from a floating signifier into a relatively fixed empty signifier was never fully accomplished, leading to the failure of the BCM campaign.

**The organization of resistance: Some questions**

What we now would like to do is to raise a few critical questions about the cases and their analyses, bearing in mind that we come from a different disciplinary background, and hence, by default, our research interests will be different to those of the authors. In our view, the empirical cases are extremely good explaining aspects of political discourse theory (PDT), and equally we can say that PDT is able to provide enough useful tools to analyze the resistance movements. However, from our perspective, there are quite a few unanswered questions, particularly with respect to how we explain the working and functioning of these resistance movements. In other words, we see important gaps in terms of our understanding these cases from an organizational perspective. In particular, we have questions about how these resistance groups make decisions, how they are funded, how they organize the internal and external communications, what might be internal power struggles. For us, these are questions to do with the more in-depth understanding of how these organizations function or often not function ‘properly’, in the case of them failing to achieve their campaign goals.

*bWhat is the role of leadership?*

The roles of leaders and political entrepreneurs are implicitly considered important issues in many of the discussed cases, yet the authors do not develop theoretical links to PDT to explain why leadership was an important moment for the organization of resistance. It is an important issue in almost every case (an exception is the Argentinean one). Howarth (2000), for example, stresses in the BCM case that, besides the organizational problems, there were also leadership deficiencies that were cruelly exposed during the Soweto uprisings and the post-Soweto clampdown. According to him, BCM activists and leaders failed to take advantage of a favourable political situation. For Howarth (2000), this happened not only as a consequence of the weakening of organizations through state repression immediately prior to the uprising, but also because of the slowness of leaders to react to events and their strangely conservative responses to the opportunities that manifested themselves.
We realize, of course, that leadership is not a theoretical category developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) or by Laclau in his oeuvre. Yet, precisely because this category implicitly occurs in many cases, including the Manchester case (Griggs and Howarth, 2000) and the SSE case (Griggs and Howarth, 2008), it seems logical to us to treat questions of leadership in a more systematic way that would sit comfortably within the framework of PDT. At the moment we feel rather discomforted by the fact that the authors seem to imply that a strategy of a resistance group is simply changed – almost overnight – by a new leader. This was particularly apparent in the HACAN ClearSkies case, which saw the broadening of the demands – beyond traditional NIMBYism and environmental issues – to include wider social justice goals. Yet, Griggs and Howarth (2004) seem to implicitly rely on the myth of a leader that made this change of strategy possible. In our view, this essentialist and humanist approach would sit quite uncomfortably within the wider PDT framework of understanding politics and resistance.

How do resistance groups fund themselves?

After reading all cases in much detail we have also been rather dissatisfied by the details we learned about how these campaign groups actually organized themselves. We hoped to find out how these groups fund themselves, how they make decisions, how they can be understood as work organization, how they organize their communication processes. More importantly perhaps, we were also interested in the gaps and failures that occurred in these organization processes, as an understanding of these failures would, in our view, also help us understand the certain failures of the resistance movements as such. Yet, the authors largely do not deliver detailed enough information about the real dynamics each movement or organization had put into practice.

For example, although funding represents an important issue in terms of how a group is able to mobilize resources for putting a struggle into action, this is something that is not discussed in the cases. We learn a little bit about raising money especially in the campaigns against airport expansion (Griggs and Howarth, 2000, 2008), but there is nothing on this issue in the Argentinean case (Barros, 2008) and the South African case (Howarth, 1997, 2000). In the SSE case, for example, Griggs and Howarth (2008) say that a community calendar alone raised £340,000 in support of the campaign. In the case of the Manchester Airport’s second runway, it was said that they quickly organized high profile events that attracted the support of local villagers, such as summer balls, and the campaign was hence able to raise over £300,000 during the run up to the public inquiry. Yet, we do not learn more details about the financial background of the campaigns. Is it not true that many resistance campaigns fail because of a lack of financial resources? And if this is the case, then would this not warrant a more detailed look at how these campaigns have been funded and how they have perhaps struggled with funding issues, as this would help us understand certain failures of longevity? Equally, if these campaigns relied extensively on voluntary work – that is, often no professional campaigners receiving perhaps a regular salary were involved – then how did these organizations make sure that this work was distributed equally, and campaigners did not experience issues such as fatigue and “burn-out”? Again, we would imagine that these issues would be of utmost importance in terms of our understanding of why and how some of these campaigns failed to deliver in the long-run.

What about internal and external communication?

Communication can, again, be seen as a crucial organizational process for the establishment of links within social networks, perhaps leading to chains of equivalences and the construction of new identities. Without communication no identity construction, we could
say. Yet, the cases talk very little about communication processes. It is very difficult for us to figure out how the internal and external communication was organized in each resistance group or movement.

For example, in the SSE case the authors talk a little bit about communication practices, such as when they mention an August 2003 press release or the practice of writing letters. In a similar way, we can recognize that the BCM used certain communication channels very frequently. Howarth (1997) gives a lot of indications on how media seemed to be important for the movement, although we do not find out any details of, for example, problems that the groups faced in terms of using the media. In the case of the human rights movement in Argentina (Barros, 2008), it is very clear that communication was essential in terms of constructing a common position by the groups of relatives of the ‘disappeared’. Barros reports on how the movement used the media towards the end of the conflict, but it is unclear how exactly they got access to the media, and whether there were, for example, sympathizers within the national newspaper they accessed. Whenever we talk about the national or even international media, there are of course important power issues involved, which, in our view, would be important to discuss, if we want to understand the success or failure of a resistance movement.

**How did these groups make decisions?**

Amongst the organizational practices and issues we have highlighted so far, decision making is perhaps the most important process that we know almost nothing about in each case. It is clear that many decisions were made in each movement and struggle, but we do not have any information about the dynamics that were involved in reaching these decisions.

Taking the Manchester second runway case (Griggs and Howarth, 2000) as an example, there is a lack of information about the way that the third phase of the campaign really came about. How was the decision made to enter into a campaign of direct action that involved not only the eco-warriors but ‘respectable’ citizens as well? We do not learn anything about the struggles that took place during the meetings, for example. We are told that the media played an important role in the situation, but we know almost nothing about the way the contacts with them occurred. Who decided about getting involved with the mainstream media? Given that many direct action campaigners do not want to get anywhere near the mainstream state or corporate media, how was it achieved that they were happy to become involved with them?

In the South African case (Howarth, 2000) we also do not learn about how they deal with the immense repression and prohibition of organizing themselves imposed by the Government after the Soweto uprising. As a lot of the organizing and decision making would have gone underground, this material fact would have, in our view, quite an important impact on the type of decisions taken. Equally, in the case of the human rights movement in Argentina (Barros, 2008) the situation is very unclear. How, we could ask for example, did the groups decide to get involved with the formal human rights organizations? How did they get in touch with the international human right movement, and what kind of internal struggles were involved in making these decisions?

The role the leadership had in the different cases is constantly reaffirmed by the authors, but it is often unclear how people participated in these decisions. Given that some groups seem to be grassroots-based, were they not concerned to implement a consensus decision making process? And if so, why did the authors emphasize again and again the ‘magical’ role of leaders without showing the struggles involved in making complex organizational decisions?
What about issues of work organization?

As far as issues to do with work organization and organizational forms and structures are concerned, it seems again that we enter into a territory that is only vaguely discussed in the cases. In the SSE case (Griggs and Howarth, 2008) we are provided with some information about different work activities of the group. For example, in the first seven weeks of its campaign, the campaigners organized eight public meetings attended by over 2,000 people; demonstrated outside the Department for Transport’s local exhibition; and produced 26,000 posters, 5,000 car stickers and 100 T-shirts. In February 2003 they also appointed their own communications officer, Carole Barbone. There was also an intense campaign for local residents to send as many letters as possible to their national and locally elected representatives. From an organizational perspective we ask ourselves, how these work activities were organized and how we can understand them from a labour process perspective. Obviously, a lot of campaigning involves voluntary work, yet sometimes, as in this case, some professionals are hired by the campaign groups. This opens up a complex set of questions to do with funding, political independence and, as mentioned before, internal communication and decision making processes. We feel that this organizational dimension plays an important part in our understanding of how hegemony and counter-hegemony is produced at the grassroots level, and how common identities are forged. As these are the questions the authors of the cases are interested in, we believe that the organizational dimension can offer interesting insights.

In the BCM case in South Africa (Howarth 2000), it is quite interesting that the author talks twice about structural conditions that explain the failure of the movement and the success of Charterism becoming the new democratic discourse in the country. However, it does not become clear what exactly these structural issues – which, we assume, would involve organizational issues – are.

Conclusions

In our view, all of the empirical cases we have looked at provide a very insightful and interesting account of the emergence and functioning of resistance movements in different political contexts. In this sense we agree with the authors that political discourse theory (PDT) offers a very useful theoretical and methodological perspective to understand social resistance failures and successes.

As far as we analyzed each case, we can note that the authors offer different explanations for the achievements reached by the movements. In the case of the human rights movement in Argentina (Barros, 2008), we see the importance of the availability of an alternative discourse for the relatives of the ‘disappeared’. The dislocation moment related to the disappointment with the military regime when asked for answers about the ‘disappeared’ was also crucial in this case. We can also emphasize the general acceptance of the resistance organization by the public and a strong common demand for answers from the government that facilitated building a strong connection among the relatives of the ‘disappeared’. These were all key elements for understanding the success of the human rights movement in Argentina at that time.

In the Manchester airport expansion case (Griggs and Howarth, 2000), we could see that the dislocation that happened with the announcement of the second runway was not enough to make people engage in a real counter-hegemonic struggle. With the Stansted airport case (Griggs and Howarth, 2008) we can see success from a short term and local perspective, but not from a national, long term perspective (not a populist form of politics). In their campaign, the SSE leadership generally emphasized local issues during the campaign, which has made it more difficult to broaden the appeal of the resistance movement. With the Heathrow case
(Griggs and Howarth, 2004) we have a successful, transformative strategy which was achieved by establishing new connections and coalitions among different environmental organizations. Here the role of the leadership was crucial to develop an equivalential chain and empty signifier among those movements fighting against airport expansion in the UK.

In the black consciousness movement’s case in South Africa (Howarth, 1997, 2000), we could see a failure that was mainly related to the difficulties of constructing or populating an empty signifier; the ‘blackness’ idea seemed not to be enough. According to Howarth, the resistance movement also did not have an adequate organizational structure to promote a strong resistance movement, and the leadership was not capable of taking advantage of the dislocation moment experienced after the Soweto uprising.

In these empirical cases different concepts of political discourse theory were explicitly or implicitly used to explain and understand the success and failure of resistance, particularly concepts such as dislocation, empty signifiers, nodal points, and equivalential chains. In addition, our reading has revealed the importance of issues such as social networks and leadership. Although there are some questions we have in terms of the theoretical rigour and consistency of the application of PDT concepts to these cases (e.g. the confusion about what constitutes a dislocatory moment), in our view, the PDT concepts have helped us and gone some way towards understanding the politics of the analyzed resistance movements. However, we have also noted a range of limits of PDT in understanding the grassroots organizational processes involved in these movements.

We have highlighted a range of questions we have in terms of understanding in more detail the organizational dynamics involved in each resistance movement. Specifically, we discussed issues, such as decision making, leadership, communication processes, funding and work organization. In our view, these organizational issues are of great importance when trying to analyze the successes and failures of resistance movements. In this paper we have not had the space to engage in a fully developed theoretical justification for why looking at the organizational level is of great importance. However, we have tried to identify meaningful and logical questions to do with these organizational issues that, we hope, will help the reader understand why looking at organizational dimensions is of importance for PDT researchers of social movements.

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