

Ayatollah Khomeini: The changing face of Islam

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Abstract

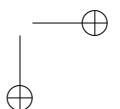
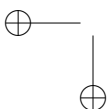
In cultural studies discourse theory is often used. Remarkably, the politically oriented work of Laclau & Mouffe has hardly been used whilst it is extremely useful for researching culture: Laclau & Mouffe can indeed be helpful to research media, conflict, and identity (politics). Their discourse theory (and that of others) can be seen as a 'toolbox' that can be combined with qualitative research methods. I agree with the concept of the 'toolbox' but argue that the complexity of combining Laclau & Mouffe with other research methods and theories within cultural studies requires the formulation of the conditions under which this is possible. I shall discuss these conditions and expand on the relationship between La-

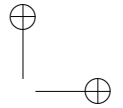
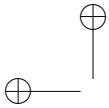
clau and Mouffe and cultural studies research. I do so by analysing the representation of Ayatollah Khomeini in Western television news from 1978 through 1989. In Western eyes Khomeini is a powerful even threatening individual: in his rational treatment he appears to have control of irrationality (in the form of 'irrational' masses). And irrationality is something that in Western culture is experienced as very threatening. Khomeini has, in Western perspective, the power over threatening irrationality. And that makes him all the more terrifying: he is represented as an 'antagonist' of great proportion because he is able to both unleash and master the irrational.

Keywords: Ayatollah Khomeini, Chantalle Mouffe, cultural studies, discourse theory, Ernesto Laclau, media studies

DISCOURSE, both as theory and method, is a useful concept in cultural studies, whereby Foucault's work is widely used. However the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, though less commonly used¹, is particularly relevant for studying cultural phenomena from the perspective of cultural studies. In this article I aim to show how and under which

1. On page 16-18 Carpentier & Spinoy (2008) list the exceptions (which are not always explicitly based on Laclau & Mouffe).





conditions cultural studies can benefit from the discourse theory of Laclau & Mouffe.

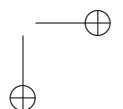
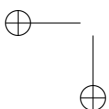
In political studies Laclau & Mouffe are recognized key thinkers; cultural studies, on the contrary, has only recently seen the first structural attempt (Carpentier & Spinoy, 2008) to integrate their discourse theory in cultural analysis. Carpentier & Spinoy demonstrate the usefulness of Laclau & Mouffe for researching conflict and identity (politics)(2008:17). Carpentier & Spinoy's have five arguments for integrating Laclau & Mouffe into cultural studies; I will discuss three. Firstly, Laclau & Mouffe employ a broad definition of 'the political', making it possible to include cultural aspects in a politicized way (2008:2). Secondly, in line with Foucault's view Laclau & Mouffe consider discourse theory to be a 'toolbox' for several academic disciplines. Carpentier & Spinoy are referring to Howarth who states that discourse theory can be complemented with qualitative research methods in order to find empirical foundations in research (Howarth, 2000:140 in: Carpentier & Spinoy, 2008:21). This 'toolbox' idea of discourse theory is plausible but, in my opinion, requires a formulation of the conditions under which Laclau & Mouffe could be combined with other theories and methods. In section 4 I will demonstrate the guiding (philosophical) premises; it is first necessary to elaborate on their theoretical positions.

Thirdly, Laclau & Mouffe focus their discourse theory on the study of politics, culture and identity concepts that are also central to cultural studies (2008:3).² The discrepancy between the usefulness of Laclau & Mouffe for cultural research and the lack of attention given to their work within cultural studies is therefore remarkable.

To better understand the usefulness of Laclau & Mouffe I will discuss more extensively three main aspects: their discourse theory in general, the 'toolbox' idea of combining discourse analysis with other theories and methods, and the relationship between their thinking and cultural studies.

I shall place Laclau & Mouffe within cultural studies by analysing a specific case: the representation of Ayatollah Khomeini in Western television news. Interestingly this representation is characterised by conflict and a reversal in the valuation of the protagonist - two aspects Laclau & Mouffe's dis-

2. The other two arguments concern Laclau & Mouffe's engagement with (high) culture, and the incorporation by cultural studies of other poststructuralist and discourse analytical approaches (Carpentier & Spinoy 2008: 2).



course theory focusses on. At the start of the Iranian revolution (1978-1979) Khomeini is partly appreciated in the West for his intellectual greatness. Soon after this representation alters: Khomeini is considered to be extremely bad, to the point of being evil. This case and Laclau & Mouffe's discourse theory offer the opportunity to demonstrate how changes in discourses occur: Laclau & Mouffe are more appropriate than for instance Foucault to explain how and why discourses are subject to change. How did the discourse on Ayatollah Khomeini change?

Case: Khomeini in the news

In the winter of 1979 Ayatollah Khomeini returns to Iran after being in exile for 15 years; the Shah is dispelled. There is great joy among the adherents of different groups: from the neo-Marxists to monarchists and religious followers. The return of Khomeini has been made possible by years of protests against the Shah, forcing the latter to flee abroad.

The enthusiasm from the early days of the Iranian Revolution also reaches the West: with a mixture of admiration and disapproval the events are reported. Ayatollah Khomeini becomes the personification of the Revolution, partly because he is able to receive journalists from Western media in his French home in exile. The West does not know how to judge him. As a history program on Dutch television puts it in retrospective, he is on the one hand seen as just:

'At the end of 1978 Western intellectuals hold the image [of Khomeini] of a holy man who advocates a much more righteous, democratic and spiritual regime than the cruel and corrupt Shah.'³

Simultaneously, the overthrow of the Western-minded Shah government is disapproved by some politicians, citizens and media. Shortly after the media construction of Khomeini changes into a - in Western eyes - malicious person. This leads to the research question: How was Ayatollah Khomeini represented in Western television news from 1978 to 1989? (1978 was the first time he appeared on Western television news, 1989 was the year he died.) I aim to demonstrate how a Western media discourse is able to change.

3. ANDERE TIJDEN, VPRO 30 September 2003.

The case material consists of news feeds used by Dutch television news.⁴ This case material is partly similar to that of other Western nations: only news feeds from international news agencies have been archived. It consists of video and audio clips of press exchange services, with no news reader or voice-over of a reporter (with a few exceptions). Unfortunately, the archive therefore does not allow the contextualisation of these clips by a news anchor and / or reporter to be analyzed. However, the material provides insight into international (at least: Western!) modes of representation; it consists of editing sequences of news agencies like ARD, ZDF (both from Germany), BBC, ITN (both United Kingdom), and CBS (USA).

It is striking that Khomeini has barely received any media attention in the Netherlands in the period up to 1978: he appears just four times on Dutch television. This is then compensated at the start of the Revolution. From 1979 onwards there is an overwhelming coverage on him in the media: he appears fifteen times in 1979 and over fifty times from 1979 through 1989. He gains attention everywhere in the West. The reason for his apparent absence from Dutch and other Western media is possibly partly the result of a lack of interest in 'Islamic affairs': the Iranian Revolution is one of the first events to receive large scale media coverage.

What do the archived news images tell us about Ayatollah Khomeini? The first images ever to be seen in The Netherlands are from the early days of the Revolution. In 1978 he speaks from his French home in exile. In the first news item⁵ he represents himself in a way that will prove to be dominant during the first year. He sits on the floor of an austere room; the only striking aspect is the wallpaper with flowery motifs. He is austere dressed in a completely black outfit. His medium long beard is gray and has some white and black shades, his eyes remain directed to the floor.

The tranquility that he seems to possess as he focusses little attention to himself is also present in his message. With quiet voice he states (in transla-

4. The case material is archived at Sound & Vision (Hilversum, The Netherlands). The database of Sound & Vision lists all the television material in which Khomeini appears as 'Persons: Khomeiny, Ruhollah'. Where sources like Wikipedia write his name as Khomeini, Sound & Vision uses a different spelling: Khomeiny with a 'y'. Just to be clear: this research is only based on television clips dealing with Khomeini, not on, for example, the occupation of the American Embassy or the Iran-Iraq war (unless Khomeini himself is present in these clips).

5. HET JOURNAAL 6 November 1978.

tion): 'People do not want the Shah and his regime. Nor will replacing one government with another satisfy the people. They have to leave people alone to form their own government'.⁶ He attributes the activity and legitimacy of the events in Iran not to himself, but to the Iranian people. Both his appearance and his words connote modesty.

In a subsequent broadcast the (American) journalist Robert MacNeil extensively interviews Khomeini at his French home.⁷ Both are seated on floor rugs. Khomeini downplays his role when asked if he would command his followers to use force against the army of the Shah. He presents himself not as the man with authority who gives orders, but asserts that his people do not wish to fight the army but will do so if necessary to claim their rights. Any use of violence is presented as a legitimate response to an oppressive state and above all as an undesirable situation that his followers are forced into by their opponents. The closing images of the interview depict Khomeini amongst praying men and women. This reinforces the images of the elementary home interior and the floor seating: he appears to be a leader uninterested in personal, worldly power or material wealth.

From then on television broadcasts regularly shows Khomeini receiving guests both journalists and supporters.⁸ Whether it is with other religious leaders or with interviewers, he is generally portrayed in the same setting: a room with carpets and wallpaper with flowery motif which almost looks familiar. His pose hardly changes: his eyes are directed to the floor, he has a simple clothing style and a soft voice. There are two other settings in which he is portrayed: the entrance of his French home⁹ and the nearby prayer tent¹⁰. The small-sized house is like its neighboring buildings situated in a narrow street in a rural environment. 'The world' in the form of foreign journalists visits Khomeini. But his house is too small to receive 'the world': due to a lack of space journalists are received in the garden and on the street. The prayer tent, which is quite spacious, is within walking distance of his house.

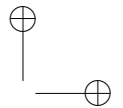
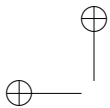
6. The translation of the Farsi-quote is provided by the English subtitles. HET JOURNAAL 6 November 1978.

7. HET JOURNAAL 2 December 1978.

8. E.g. HET JOURNAAL 19 December 1978 and HET JOURNAAL 13 January 1979.

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10. E.g. HET JOURNAAL 18 January 1979 and HET JOURNAAL 25 January 1979.



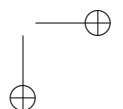
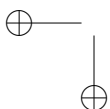
Khomeini never appears alone near the tent: there is always a large group of journalists, religious leaders and ordinary believers present.

Despite the change of setting his appearance remains the same as inside his home: Khomeini appears modest not aspiring to worldly power or personal status. This portrayal remains unchanged for a short while upon his return to Iran on 1 February 1979. Though a new element is introduced: chaos. As he walks down the aircraft stairs in his familiar black outfit crowds of journalists and military men are seen pushing and pulling to get a glimpse of Khomeini.¹¹ And as his car drives off soldiers run behind it for no apparent reason. This scene is followed by Khomeini's tour through the streets of Tehran: tens of thousands of mostly male supporters crowd the streets. Security men on the car ward off frenzied fans and viewers only get to see a glimpse of Khomeini. What makes these chaotic scenes positive is the joy his return has caused: balloons are released into the sky and crowds are witnessed singing.

Nevertheless, these images contain the elements of the negative interpretation of Khomeini in the West: the chaotic scenes include armed men and frenzied supporters. On 14th February 1979 images of a shooting are broadcast. Masked men are seen running down the streets; they are shooting without apparent coordination or direction. A car speeds off as a rifle is thrown out of the window. Another car follows a military jeep that enters a gate. There is uncertainty over the power structures between these people (who is in charge?), the purpose of the actions and above all over the presence or absence of discipline to channel the events (whether it concerns a massive turn-out on the streets or an armed conflict) in order to prevent a loss of control. Because that is exactly what is expected in (Western) public spaces.

Khomeini partly takes up the role of directing the events: he calmly calls for weaponry to be turned in with severe penalties as countermeasure. The first part of his call is consistent with earlier news reports: the soft spoken Khomeini denouncing violence; the second part is new: Khomeini promoting coercive measures. In retrospect it can be concluded that the period shortly after his return to Iran is a transitional phase in which the representation changes from Khomeini as modest man lacking worldly power claims to Khomeini as a negatively valued power politician. Gradually the last representation prevails in the West.

11. HET JOURNAAL 1 February 1979.



The gradual representation changes of Khomeini start in 1979. Interestingly he is hardly ever present in television news during the occupation of the American embassy in Tehran (1979-1981). He is however seen at the end of a news coverage on an armed clash between different religious followers in the city of Qom.¹² In the aftermath of a battle (with images of faces covered with blood and bandages, pools of blood on the ground, a car driving through a hysterical crowd etc.) Khomeini is shown looking stoically when visiting Ayatollah Madari with whom he is having a dispute. At the end of his visit Khomeini declares that the violence will 'God willingly' stop. The English voice-over ends the report with: 'Khomeini, the all powerful leader of Iran'.¹³ This marks the turning point in the representation of Khomeini: from now on he is shown as someone who has *political* (instead of only religious or moral) power and is able and willing to use that power in the midst of chaotic scenes. During the entire decade (the 1980's) his representation in the West is extremely one-dimensional: he is the calm person amidst emotional scenes. Even more so: he seems to have control over those emotions.

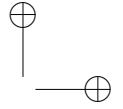
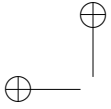
Chronologically, there are thus three distinct phases: during his 'French era', the early days of the Revolution, he is represented as modest. Then there is a transitional phase: shortly after his arrival in Iran he is seen as the embodiment of calmness amidst chaos. During the longest period, the entire 1980's, he is represented in Western news reports as a person who, as a political and religious leader, has (absolute) power over emotional crowds. This change in discourse can be understood on a theoretical level with Laclau & Mouffe's work on discourses. Before I will go into that I shall position Laclau & Mouffe within the broader field of discourse theory to indicate the specific nature of their thinking.

The field of discourse theory

Despite the differences between the many forms of discourse theory, of which Foucault is probably the best known within cultural studies, there are four aspects that they have in common (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 5-6). Firstly, they examine the world and knowledge about it not "objectively" but critically (or: as normatively constructed). From there it follows, and that is the second aspect, that knowledge is considered historically and cultur-

12. HET JOURNAAL 6 December 1979 and HET JOURNAAL 9 December 1979.

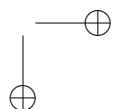
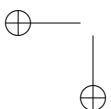
13. HET JOURNAAL 9 December 1979.

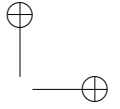
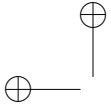


ally specific, and, thirdly, as shaped by social interaction. Fourthly, the relationship between knowledge and social action implies that different types of knowledge lead to different types of social action. This commonality between discourse theories is rooted largely in their Foucauldian origin. The result is that discourse analysts explicitly relate themselves to Foucault, who views discourses as (largely) bound by rules. Laclau & Mouffe, but others as well, differ from Foucault as they insist on a more conflicting concept of discourses.

Foucault was the first to understand 'the subject' in a discourse analytical way. He built on Althusser's concept of interpellation and ideology. It is crucial that the construction of a social position for a subject by means of language is inevitable according to Althusser: the subject can only be an ideological subject. This determinism is heavily criticized (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 16-18). Laclau & Mouffe depart in two ways from this determinism. First, they recognize that there is not one totalizing ideology that is subjecting people: subject positions change when the context changes. But to Laclau & Mouffe the debate over the determination of subjects is of secondary importance: they are more interested in abstract discursive processes than in singular, concrete cases – something they share with Foucault. Secondly, they state that the concept of ideology itself is problematic; 'ideology' implies that the truth can be known when all distortions (or: misrepresentations) are removed. In contrast to discourse theorists like Fairclough (1995) Laclau & Mouffe view 'ideology' as an empty concept - they therefore do not use it in a neo-Marxist way.

This brings us to a crucial point of Laclau & Mouffe. They consider it impossible to distinguish between ideological and non-ideological discourses in the hope to step outside of ideology. Unlike for instance Althusser, Foucault and Critical Discourse Analysis (like Fairclough and others) Laclau & Mouffe hold the opinion that there are non-discursive aspects to social practices: bodies, institutions, economy, infrastructure etc. are all part of discourses. Thus there is no dialectical relationship between discourses and something else: 'discourse itself is fully constitutive of our world' (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 20). With this Laclau & Mouffe represent the most post-structuralist form of discourse analysis: discourses are always in relation to other discourses, which brings forth a constant struggle between discourses to gain hegemony (as a –unattainable– fixation of meanings). This 'discursive struggle' leads Laclau & Mouffe to focus on changes in discourses. Their



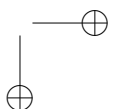
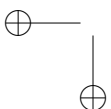


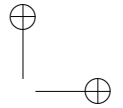
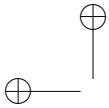
theory is therefore extremely useful to understand the changing representations of Ayatollah Khomeini. But in order to analyse these changes it is first necessary to discuss Laclau & Mouffe further now that their position in the discursive field has been noted.

Laclau & Mouffe

Laclau & Mouffe are not so much interested in specific practices, but in abstract discourses, although always accompanied by the idea that discourses are created, changed and maintained in everyday practice. They therefore focus on how discourses limit our possibilities, instead of looking at human activity. This is a consequence of the critical project of Laclau & Mouffe (1985) to unmask naturalized knowledge. They do so by demonstrating contingencies (the deconstruction of fixations of meaning); this opens opportunities for alternative ways of thinking and acting. However, the alternatives are also not non-ideological or non-discursive: Laclau (1990) argues that it is true that ideology implies a distortion, but that this is inevitable since *any* representation of the world is a distortion. Thereby Laclau & Mouffe correspond to ideology criticism in that, firstly, they expose contingencies and, secondly, deconstruct 'objectivity'; they also deviate from it by stating that there is no ideology-free truth as an alternative. They align themselves with post-structuralism by pointing out the non-absolute nature of discursive structures, so that the determination of social subjects can never be total. This non-absolute, in other words contingent, nature of discourses enables dislocations: a dislocation is a 'destabilization of a discourse that results from the emergence of events which cannot be domesticated, symbolized or integrated within the discourse in question' (Torfing, 1999: 301). It is a process whereby discursive structures become visible, allowing Torfing to conclude that 'dislocation is the very form of temporality, possibility and freedom' (Torfing, 1999: 148-149).

Because of the absence of a determining principle, everything can be seen as discourse (or as Derrida says, 'everything becomes discourse'. Derrida, 1978: 280). Laclau & Mouffe therefore use the term discourse to indicate that any social configuration is meaningful (Laclau & Mouffe, 1990: 100). The meaning of each material object (from a stone to the human body) is





articulated within discourses, so that there is nothing in nature that determines the 'being' of an object:

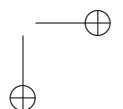
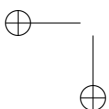
The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought, or with that realism / idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exist in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of 'natural phenomena' or 'expressions of the wrath of God', depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive conditions of emergence. (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 108)

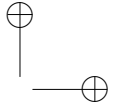
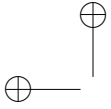
Thus, discourses are omnipresent in the social field: they form a relational system of meaningful practices. Meanings are differential in nature; they are established in relation to other meanings, without a fixed reference point in the 'real'. There is no ultimate fixation of meanings, which also applies to social identities: these are also differential in nature and therefore only partially fixed.

This raises the question how we should see this partial fixation. Since both absolute fixation and absolute non-fixation (because with the latter there are no discourses, only psychosis) are impossible according to Laclau & Mouffe (1985: 113) they introduce the concept of 'nodal points':

[...] order – or structure – no longer takes the form of an underlying essence of the social; rather, it is an attempt – by definition unstable and precarious, to act over that 'social', to hegemonize it. [...] the social always exceeds the limits of the attempts to constitute a society. At the same time however that 'totality' does not disappear: if the suture it attempts is ultimately impossible, it is nevertheless possible to proceed to a relative fixation of the social through the institution of nodal points. (Laclau, 1990: 90-91)

Nodal points are reference points that grant a discourse temporary stability and consistency. In Western discourses the concept of, for instance, 'democracy' functions as a nodal point for other meanings such as 'freedom', 'individuality' and 'rationality': the latter elements are articulated in the Western nodal point of 'democracy'. A nodal point, therefore, ensures that partial fixation can occur in a structured network of meanings. Or in the words of Laclau & Mouffe:



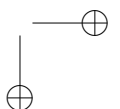
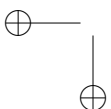


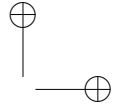
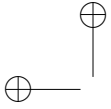
The practice of articulation therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity. (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 113).

We can therefore (again) conclude that the discourse theory of Laclau & Mouffe is characterised by their focus on the possibility of changes in meanings. Indeed, articulation is 'a practice that establishes a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice' (Torfing, 1999: 298). By, for example, pairing 'freedom' to 'rationality' both concepts are subject to change. Laclau & Mouffe's focus on changes in discourses implies that they are also applicable to conflicts.

As discussed earlier meaning partly arises as a result of difference, or: its relation to other meanings. And those other meanings are partly 'the other'. Such a social antagonism is therefore on the one hand constitutive for the formation of identity: it is a point at which something can be negatively referred. A discourse finds its limits by the exclusion of 'radical otherness': that which has nothing in common with the differential system through which the exclusion takes place. Such a 'constitutive outside' both limits and denies the lines of demarcation that are involved in the formation of identity.

A social antagonism is thus also threatening: it ensures that identity can never be fully completed. If a subject identifies with meanings there is always something in their identity that cannot be constructed by these meanings as an antagonism is always needed as a point of reference. Therefore there is no subject position with which a person is fully able to identify. A social antagonism, or: constitutive outside, is thus both a condition for and a barrier to discursive identity formation. The process takes place according to the 'logic of equivalence': the equalization of discourses (A+B+C) in opposition to the negative discourse of 'the other' (D): $A=B=C \neq D$. The result is that the differences within the chain of equivalence (the differences between A, B and C) are weakened in contrast to D. For example, countries that comply with the 'Universal declaration of human rights' are equalized with each other by distancing themselves from 'barbaric cultures', which is at the same time a reduction of complexities within the equalized countries. Following the same logic the complexity increases when the constitutive outside disappears (e.g. because the joint enemy is defeated); this is the 'logic of difference'.

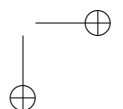
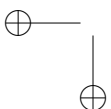


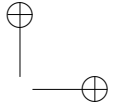
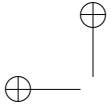


Now that the basics of Laclau & Mouffe's discourse have been briefly (and inevitably also incompletely) presented, I would like to return to what I stated in section 1. There I mentioned that discourse theory is sometimes seen as a 'toolbox': as something that can be combined and enriched with other theories and methods. As Laclau & Mouffe (and others, like Foucault) are 'short on specific methodological guidelines and illustrative examples' (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 8) this may increase both its analytical abilities and its insight in a specific cultural or social phenomenon. The aims of a 'toolbox' is twofold: to deploy the specific knowledge of each theory, and to derive an explanatory power from the combination of discourse analysis and other theories (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 154).

Although this 'toolbox' can be extremely powerful certain conditions have to be observed when using Laclau & Mouffe. The first of the three conditions is that other theories have to be 'translated' into discourse analytical terms. Laclau & Mouffe take the non-essentialist philosophical assumption that everything in the social and cultural field is discursive: theories that recognise non-discursive aspects (e.g. 'economy', 'human bodies') have to be brought in line with non-essentialist thinking. Secondly and based on the previous point, the selection of the phenomenon to be analysed is based on the theoretical and methodological framework and not vice versa. There are two reasons for this: Laclau & Mouffe hold the view that knowledge is a product of (research) perspectives and therefore *constructs* a phenomenon (i.e. the object of a research), and the selection of a perspective is a political matter as it can help bring about social change (following the assumption that 'the social world' is a construct that may be understood and re-constructed in different terms) (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 154-155). Thirdly, eclecticism is to be avoided when using a 'toolbox': one needs to assess the (philosophical, theoretical and methodological) relations between the applied approaches when combining them (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 154-155). Considering the specific nature of Laclau & Mouffe's discourse theory these three conditions are crucial to undertaking valid 'toolbox' research in the social and cultural domain.

It is impossible to summarize Laclau & Mouffe in a few paragraphs. But I hope that the above may constitute the foundation to better understand the changes in discourse on Ayatollah Khomeini, as we have seen that Laclau





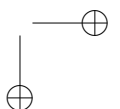
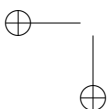
& Mouffe focus on sites of conflict and the struggle that is involved in the construction of identity.

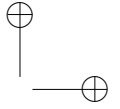
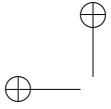
Case study: Khomeini

In section 2 we concluded that the representation of Ayatollah Khomeini on Dutch TV news (that was based on international/Western news feeds) changed from positive in the early days of the Revolution (1978 and early 1979) to negative in subsequent years (from the end of 1979 onwards). How could this change occur? To begin with, in the line of Laclau & Mouffe we can argue that at times of great change meaning structures become visible; these are moments of dislocation. The condition is that meanings are contingent: there is no ultimate fixation of meanings as they only exist because of relationships with other meanings. And if those other meanings change, the relations change and thus the original meaning. To understand the change in representation of Ayatollah Khomeini we can analyse the changed meanings to which he is related.

Initially, Khomeini is related to balanced and soft speaking, an intellectual approach, relative accessibility and firmness. All these aspects are taken together and give him meaning; it is a 'chain of equivalence' that can be represented as 'A=B=C'. This is coupled with an antagonistic relationship ('A=B=C ≠ D'). As antagonism the Shah ('D') stands for e.g. autocracy, material exuberance, modernization and violent oppression. Modernization as a concept largely holds a positive connotation, while autocracy, material exuberance (in the form of waste) and violence all hold negative meanings. Thus the Shah does not embody a singular meaning: in Western media he is represented as partly good and partly bad. He is not a 'radical otherness' but an 'outside' to which the representation of the (in Western eyes) newcomer Khomeini can be related. When in 1978 he appears on Dutch television for the first time, the relationships, including antagonistic ones, have to be formed in order to 'construct' the representation of Khomeini.

Characteristically meanings change as soon as a related meaning changes. Shortly after the appearance of Ayatollah Khomeini in Western media the Shah loses political power: early in 1979 he is expelled from Iran and is then too sick to be able to undertake anything political (he dies of cancer in



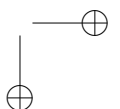
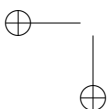


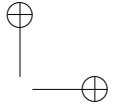
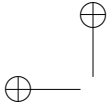
1980). When amongst others the Shah is lost as an antagonism Khomeini has to be related to someone/something else to still carry meaning. Were the Shah would have remained in power then Khomeini could have been related to him longer. He now disappears from the stage and new meanings must be found to bring Khomeini in an oppositional relationship. The gap that the Shah leaves is rapidly filled. There is a new symbol, not in the form of one person but as a crowd of people. The existing representations of Iranian crowds is that of seemingly unorganized groups of people that shout slogans and waive their fists. This representation of 'Islamic crowds' in news broadcasts seems a prefiguration of later Hollywood films. According to Campbell (1997) the movie 'Not without my daughter' (1991) contains this representation:

'Always congregated in large groups in the film, Iranians communicate by simultaneously speaking, often accompanying their speech with use of hands. Rather than positioning this expressive communication style as a cultural difference, director Gilbert tries to manipulate the Western viewer into feeling overwhelmed by loud, illogical people with no conversational rules.' (Campbell, 1997: 180)

The crowds of people form a structure consisting of relationships with e.g. chaos, violence, the impersonal (almost amorphous) and divides (between supporters of various sub-ideologies). According to Fuller such a representation is exemplary for the most coercive step in the process of stereotyping: in the so-called 'conscious social commentary' phase there is an intertwining of the narrative line and social developments (Fuller, 1997: 188). That this is also present in non-fiction, which is the case with the representation of Khomeini, is something I will discuss below, but not before I get back to the toolbox idea of combining Laclau & Mouffe's work with other theories. In section 4 I argued that there are conditions for the use of other theories with their views that are non-essentialist and analyse the entire cultural world in terms of discourses. Therefore I will now have to make explicit what relationship I think there is between Laclau & Mouffe and the recently mentioned Campbell and Fuller.

Campbell and Fuller base their analysis primarily on Said's Orientalism (1978). The question is then which position Said takes concerning (non-)essentialism and discourses. Authors like Mellor (2004) are not the first that in retrospect state that the concept of orientalism is not an entirely coherent combination of 'Foucauldian social constructivism' and 'trans-cultural human



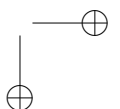
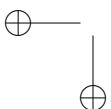


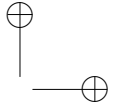
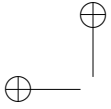
realities'. I think that, before all, orientalism must be read as a polemical work of which both an essentialist and a non-essentialist reading is possible. Where he discusses Western representations of Muslim cultures a non-essentialist reading is appropriate, while Said lapses into essentialism when proposing more adequate representations. And as Campbell and Fuller deconstruct Western representations their text may be read non-essentialistically. That they are implicitly based on Said's use of Foucault makes the above-mentioned ideas of Campbell and Fuller compatible with Laclau & Mouffe, provided that the difference between what can be seen as a discourse between on the one hand Foucault and Said and on the other Laclau and Mouffe is observed. This is perhaps a very explicit discussion of the 'toolbox relationship' between Laclau & Mouffe and other theories (in other studies this may be mentioned in a note), but I think that this is necessary, since one purpose of this article is to illustrate how the in itself already interdisciplinary cultural studies can be combined with the work of Laclau & Mouffe.

Back now to Fuller: building on what Fuller calls a 'conscious social commentary (an integration of narrative line and social developments), we can conclude that this also applies to non-fiction. It is notable that Ayatollah Khomeini is not represented as equal to the crowds, but that he is constructed as different from them; he is able to both calm and excite crowds. Thus we see him addressing a crowd of grievors after 72 political and spiritual leaders have died, including Khomeini's old comrade Ayatollah Behesti.¹⁴ The crowd chants slogans and seems to exist in itself. A small truck covered with facial images drives through the crowd. Many portraits, including that of Khomeini, are held up in the air. In the subsequent segment we see and hear Khomeini: he speaks to men who cry, hold their heads and utter inaudible sentences; with his speech Khomeini guides their mourning process. After some time the men appear to be comforted by his words. The opposite also happens: Khomeini not calming people but arousing them. In his condemnation of the laying of mines in the Red Sea, we see him addressing a large group of men.¹⁵ He is holding up his right arm. By the time he is finished speaking and gets out of his chair we hear the men shouting slogans energetically. Khomeini, the embodiment of control, plays the people. Yet it is not the crowd that he holds

14. HET JOURNAAL 30 June 1981.

15. HET JOURNAAL 10 August 1984.





an antagonistic relationship to. He does so with what the crowds represent; the excited groups carry the meaning of ‘emotional’ or ‘irrational’. And that is with what Khomeini enters an antagonistic relationship into; as very controlled ‘master’ of irrational forces, Khomeini is the opposite of irrationality ($A \neq B$).

This representation in the West of Khomeini as ‘master’ of emotional crowds is dominant from the end of 1979 onwards. Several times, a contrast between him and others becomes visible. Regularly we see him in his Mosque addressing people: these people are always shown as masses (instead of individuals) with a lot of emotions, whilst Khomeini represents calmness.¹⁶ A striking example is the blessing of members of the Air Force.¹⁷ These soldiers do not conform to the Western image of soldiers: instead of dealing with instructions in a disciplined manner, they are excited. They shout slogans and wave their fists. In sharp contrast to this Khomeini, sitting on a raised floor, remains stoical: he says nothing and gazes straight ahead. He then raises his right hand; the shouting of the military men becomes more controlled as they now together with clergy men shout ‘in a single voice’ – only Khomeini is silent. This is also the dominant representation during the condemnation of Salman Rushdie.¹⁸ Khomeini is again seated on the raised floor from where he preaches. He blesses war veterans, allows a clergy man to repeat his call to kill Rushdie, and finally raises his right hand again. The role of the crowd is limited to shouting slogans and displaying combativeness.

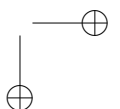
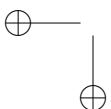
Where in Western media such support is associated with irrationality, Khomeini stands for control. That makes him a powerful, even threatening, person in Western eyes: because of his self-control he seems to have control over irrationality. And irrationality is something that is regarded as highly threatening in Western culture (Neiman, 2004).

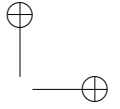
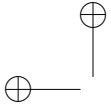
Khomeini has, according to a western perspective, control over threatening irrationality, and that makes him even more frightening: he is represented as an antagonist of large dimensions as he is able to both unleash and control irrationality. In the representation of Ayatollah Khomeini, the West is thus confronted with its own long and deep struggle with irrationality.

16. E.g. HET JOURNAAL 29 July 1987 and 26 July 1988.

17. HET JOURNAAL 9 February 1989.

18. HET JOURNAAL 21 February 1989.





As Laclau & Mouffe focus on the relationships between meanings, the analysis of Ayatollah Khomeini can be extended by turning to other meanings. He is not only associated with the Shah and irrationality, but also with, for example, Saddam Hussein who was in the early 1980's still respectable in Western eyes. The Iran-Iraq war, which lasted from 1980 to 1988, caused an antagonistic relationship between Khomeini and Saddam. Also, the representation of Khomeini can be analyzed by laying bare discourses about the USA: the USA granted political and other support to the Shah and opposed Khomeini. I can not help feeling that the valuation of Khomeini by leftist Western intellectuals (who, as mentioned, saw him as just, non-materialistic, etc.) may have been fed by an anti-Americanism which was then in vogue. These and other meanings to which Ayatollah Khomeini can be related make interesting future research material.¹⁹ For now it suffices to note that the change of discourse on Ayatollah Khomeini in the West can be understood by looking at (a) meanings with which he is associated (both in the form of a 'chain of equivalence' and as 'antagonism') and (b) the explanatory power of Laclau & Mouffe regarding the (changes in the) constructions of meanings.

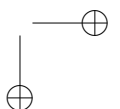
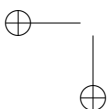
Relevance of Laclau & Mouffe for cultural studies

When media, conflicts and identity (politics) are the subject of research, cultural studies can very well benefit from the work of Laclau & Mouffe: both are 'politicised' approaches, according to Bowman (2007). Where cultural studies is concerned with politicising daily practices post-Marxist discourse theory (as that of Laclau & Mouffe) is interested in political strategies.²⁰ The adoption of Laclau & Mouffe's work by cultural studies is therefore appropriate and productive.

Besides the political aspect cultural studies and Laclau & Mouffe have more in common that makes integration worth pursuing. Both see research into 'meanings' as central to understanding (and changing) societies. Laclau & Mouffe have stated this repeatedly (e.g. 1985, 1990a, 1990b), while, for

19. The selected case material does not allow me to discuss this further; to analyse, for example, relationships between Ayatollah Khomeini and Saddam Hussein or the United States more keywords than the one mentioned in note 4 are required.

20. See amongst others the section 'The discourse of post-Marxism' in chapter one of Bowman (2007: 10-24).



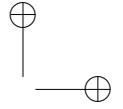
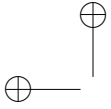
instance, cultural studies theorist Gray states that “Culture is understood as being actively produced through complex processes. It is broadly the production of meaning or ‘signifying practice’ that happens at every level of the social and at every moment within cultural processes” (Gray, 2003: 12).²¹ The social struggle between dominant and subaltern groups is seen as a conflict of meanings: “A set of social relations obviously requires meanings and frameworks which underpin them and hold them in place” (Hall in Fiske, 1987: 52). The conflict of meanings is therefore a conflict over whose interests are (most) served by society at large. According to Corner (1991) this idea limits the central questions in cultural studies to: what meaning is being construed, why is it this particular meaning and how does this particular meaning relate to power, knowledge, identity, etc?²²

The ‘meaning struggles’ being researched and conceptualised in cultural studies, that build upon the work of Gramsci, is often considered to be a class-struggle: “The concept of hegemony is used by Gramsci to refer to a *condition in progress*, in which a dominant class (in alliance with other classes or class fractions) does not merely *rule* a society but *leads* it through the exercise of ‘moral and intellectual leadership’” (Storey, 2001: 103. Emphasis in original). The importance of Gramsci’s hegemony to cultural studies is twofold. It makes it possible (and necessary) to view popular culture (as a pillar of everyday life) as an arena, as a struggle about social power. Also, Gramsci has ensured that the concept of popular culture was revised: it is the combination of ideas on culture industry (culture as a ‘structure’) and ideas about culture as “bottom-up” effect (culture as ‘agency’). This combination enables culture to be seen as an ‘equilibrium’ of opposing forces: top-down and bottom-up (Storey, 1999: 149). Storey (2001) therefore speaks of ‘neo-Gramscian cultural studies’ as Gramsci’s focus on class is supplemented with an interest in concepts like gender, race, ethnicity, religion etc.

In this essay I hope to have demonstrated that the work of Laclau & Mouffe enables us to use a coherent, single theory (possibly supplemented with other theories as discussed in section 4) in the diverse neo-Gramscian

21. For the two conditions to obtain meaning making successfully, see Hermes (1995: 7). For problematic meaning making and the corresponding temporal structure, see Leurs (2009).

22. Though Corner does not distance himself from the primacy of meaning making, he merely makes it problematical. This primacy causes the whole body of cultural studies research to consist of research into ‘negotiated reading’ (Gray, 1999: 27)



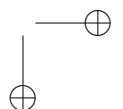
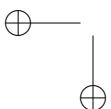
cultural studies research into social struggle, whereby it, in contrast with Foucault, conceives the *whole* cultural field as being of a discursive nature (as Derrida (1978: 280) states: “everything becomes discourse”). This is not a denial of the existence of material objects, but the assumption that:

“[t]he fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought, or with that realism / idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of ‘natural phenomena’ or ‘expressions of the wrath of God’, depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive conditions of emergence.” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 108)

The result of integrating Laclau & Mouffe’s discourse theory in cultural studies is that research into social struggle can be radicalized: if *all* aspects of social struggle are of a discursive nature (in contrast with e.g. Foucault) the field of ‘meaning relations’ can be extended, contributing to new answers to the three questions formulated by Corner.

This will, however, not be possible without keeping an eye on the differences between cultural studies and Laclau & Mouffe.²³ Most importantly, where their discourse theory is completely non-essentialist some cultural studies research is of a neo-marxist nature, putting social class central to societal structures. This is not to say that neo-marxism can be reduced to an essentialisation of social class, but that the concept of social class is still prominent in some cultural studies. Laclau & Mouffe demonstrate that one can research themes that are historically associated with neo-marxism, for instance the deconstruction of naturalisations, the suggestion of alternative meanings and social conflict, on entirely (and thereby non-essentialist) discourse analytical grounds. This post-marxist approach might prove to be inspiring as well as productive for cultural studies.

23. For a survey of general critique on Laclau & Mouffe (as well as counter arguments), see: Carpentier & Spinoy (2008: 13-16) and Jørgensen & Phillips (2002: 179-185).



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