Problematization

At the end of the 20th century *the modern project* has become untrustworthy! Or rather: the possibility of finding or creating a pure, rational and ahistorical foundation for science as well as ethics, and the idea that such a foundation will of necessity lead to human emancipation has been called into doubt. The possibility of this doubt must be seen in the light of the horrors that occurred in the heart of enlightened Europe throughout the 20th century, but it must also be understood in relation to the history of the philosophical critique of objectivity and metaphysics. Today we find it impossible to believe in the modern project. We cannot believe in a linear historicity, in objective truth, in the idea that the rationalization of society and technological advances necessarily will lead to the good society. In the slipstream of the dismissal of the modern project, post-modern philosophy has focused on the particular and the singular instead of the general and the universal. In post-modernity, universality and objectivity have been replaced by pluralism and differing perspectives.

Nevertheless, the post-modern belief is not unproblematic. It has considerable consequences for the status of ethics and science. Without an ethic provided by either nature, God or reason, how are we to imagine — not to say create — a good society? If truth is not something we can discover, a riddle we can solve in the great book of nature, how are we to understand the role of science? On the basis of these problems pluralistic thinking is, in the perspective of some, equivalent to a total annihilation of values as such.

Thus, on the one hand, we would like to avoid the metaphysics of the enlightenment, which claims to have a conditionless insight into the true state of the world. This way of thought has 'proven to be' untrustworthy on the political and practical level as a result of the unredeemed promises of progress, as well as on the epistemological level because the objective perception of science 'turned out to be' only one perspective among others, which aims to achieve something with the world that is made the subject of inquiry. On the other hand, we strive to avoid *the negative nihilism*: a metaphysics that insists on the inherent insolvability of the obstacles, that all values are relative and therefore non-committing and indifferent, and can be put into practice as existential angst, loss of identity, cosmic absurdity and alienation. It is between these two extremes, the veritable Scylla and Charybdis of philosophy, that different post-modern philosophical projects try to navigate. But how can one acknowledge the negative implications of post-modern philosophy if one – in the light of the history of modernity and the modern critique of metaphysics – finds it impossible to return to the universalistic thought of foundations? How is it possible, at the same time, to take the critique of universality and objectivity seriously, and still believe in the value of ethics and science? How is it possible to understand the notions of ethical and scientific thought if one does not have unconditional confidence in rationality? How is it possible to establish a critical perspective without an objective and universal foundation? How can a dismissal of the basis of the modern thought of enlightenment be combined with a defense of the Enlightenment's political ambitions of human emancipation and radical democracy?

Programme and research question

If one takes the questions above seriously, it becomes clear that one exhaustive and definitive answer is not asked for, but, instead, that a certain degree of pluralism in the process of thought is presupposed. This implies, on the one hand, that one is to remain humble in regards to the status ascribed to the knowledge acquired, and, on the other hand, that one makes a virtue out of necessity: all answers to the great questions will remain provisional and uncertain. There have been innumerable attempts to formulate answers to these types of questions, and just as many attempts to reformulate the questions themselves and to conceptualize the circumstances that serve as the context for their understanding.[1]

Here, however, I wish to investigate only two of these related types of thought: namely *social constructivist discourse theory* and *radical hermeneutics*, as these theories are represented respectively in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and Gianni Vattimo. It may not seem intuitive that these two theoretical formations, which can be regarded as expressions of different kinds of scholarly tradition – political sociology and continental philosophy, respectively – and which are often operationalized in separate research environments, should be obvious subjects for comparison. Nevertheless, I hold that these two theories are, within their respective disciplines, converging in what could be called the sociological turn of philosophy and the philosophical orientation of the sociology of knowledge. Here, my objective is to argue that one can talk about a kinship or an affinity between these two seemingly heterogeneous types of thought, and, furthermore, to illuminate the character of this relationship. In other words, I wish to argue in favor of the claim that these two theoretical formations are engaged with related types of problems, but have conceptualized

them differently. They share central insights, but understand these insights with different vocabularies. Furthermore, I wish to undertake a comparative analysis that aims at throwing light upon the different analytical strategies and horizons of understanding the two meta-theories offer / open, in order to discuss how hermeneutics and constructivism could mutually inform and enrich each other or benefit from each others' insights, when it comes to the question of human emancipation and radical democracy.

Research question:

What kinship can be described between Laclau & Mouffe's discourse theory and Vattimo's hermeneutics, and how can this relation contribute to a rethinking of the question of human emancipation and radical democracy?

The structure of the article

This article is structured in the following way: the first two chapters consist respectively of readings and presentations of Vattimo's weak thought and Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. I have attempted to focus on how each of these authors present their theory's' 'antecedent' or background (that is, what and whom they write in continuation of and in opposition to), how they formulate their central problems, and, furthermore, how they formulate, introduce, legitimate and reflect upon their own 'meta-perspectives'. I have also attempted to explain important notions and key concepts, as they appear. In the third chapter, I have undertaken an analytical comparison of the two theories. This comparison focuses on the (anti-)foundations inherent to the two positions on theory of science, and their implications for which types of analysis and narratives that are made possible by the employment of their different categories. Furthermore I discuss the status and role of science, social critique and ethics as they appear in the light of the two theories. In the fourth chapter, I will discuss the relationship between emancipation and truth, using discourse theory and weak thought as points of reference.

1. The weak thought

How is it possible to understand ethics, justice and emancipation if one accepts that no final foundation of thought is ever given? This is the question that Gianni Vattimo raises and attempts to answer with “The Weak Thinking” (Vattimo, 2005a, p. 53-55; Nielsen, 2005a, p. 9). According to Vattimo, this question becomes meaningful when one accepts nihilism as part of today’s human and philosophical conditions (Vattimo, 1997, p. 5). This acceptance is to be understood in light of Vattimo’s syncretic interlacing of Nietzsche’s perspectivist teachings of interpretation with Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics and positing of the hermeneutic turn in phenomenology (Nielsen, 2005a, p. 19-20; Nielsen, 2005b, p. 132-133; Rorty, 2004, p. 9).

In regard to hermeneutics, Vattimo takes as a point of departure the existential analytics from the first part of Martin Heidegger’s magnum opus *Being and Time*, in which human being as *Dasein* is explored and conceptualized. One of the central points here is that being human is always-already being in the world (with others) and, thus, always-already being engaged in the practice of understanding and interpreting. Humanity is, in other words, embedded in concrete relations of sense and meaning, in such a way that prejudice precedes perception. This means that human beings are interested subjects rather than neutral observers. Thus, in this perspective, knowledge is always interpretation (Vattimo, 2005b, p. 44; Heidegger, 2007, p. 79 § 12, p. 171 § 31 & p. 177ff § 32).

Similarly, Vattimo's starting point with regards to Nietzsche is the part of the latter's teachings of interpretation that roughly reject all of the western philosophical tradition's aspirations to obtain a pure and objective, universal and ahistorical cognition of the true structure of the world. This aspiration presupposes a distinction between the immediate experienced phenomena and the intrinsic nature of the world.[2] In this context, Nietzsche's famous statements that "God is dead" and "the true world finally became a fable"[3], come to express two things: first, that nothing is given and absolute truth thus must yield in favour of different historically situated, reality constituting interpretations; and, second, a repudiation of every metaphysical position claiming an unconditional insight into the unconditional foundation of knowledge. The God, whose death certificate Nietzsche signs, is thus not solely a reference to the Christian God whose historically privileged position as the indubitable Archimedean point were challenged and undermined in the age of Nietzsche, but is instead to be understood as a metaphor for all metaphysical axiomatic final grounds (i.e. reason, reality, humanity, nature, etc.).

The point of departure that Vattimo inherits from both Heidegger and Nietzsche is – in the words of the latter[4] – that there are no facts, only interpretations. The philosophical project of Vattimo thus starts where the central insight of hermeneutics, that knowledge is a historico-cultural interpretation, has been accepted, and continues as Vattimo uses hermeneutics to question the status of hermeneutics itself: if one accepts that everything is interpretation, this must necessarily be an interpretation as well. In other words, the claim that hermeneutics should be more valid or more truthful than other philosophical or epistemological positions cannot be maintained on the basis of hermeneutics itself. According to Vattimo, this means that the hermeneutical critique of metaphysics, which states that no ahistorical and objective foundations of knowledge exists, does not match up to its own standards and thus does not vanquish but instead reinstitutes metaphysics (Vattimo, 2005a, p. 241; Vattimo, 2005b, p. 43ff). Against this backdrop (that not even the absence of a foundation can constitute a foundation for thinking), Vattimo investigates the possibilities of

an emancipatory and non-totalitarian nihilistic philosophy.

Strong thinking

Central to Vattimo's project is a distinction between what he terms strong and weak thinking, which, as I will discuss later, plays a key role in his critique of culture and ethico-political enterprise. Strong thinking is a generic term referring to the kind of thinking which implicitly or explicitly claims to be based upon universal and ahistorical facts, and thus claims to hold a privileged and true understanding of fundamental and objective conditions. Strong thinking is synonymous with metaphysically based thinking, in a sense where metaphysics – in the words of Vattimo – is defined as the ultimate foundation *"for which no conditions can be adduced that in turn found it; if it has no conditions, it is unconditioned, it can only present itself as an absolute truth"* (Vattimo, 2004, p. 38). To this category belong those variants of post-modern philosophy that insist that *no* foundation of ethics or knowledge *exists*, because this implicitly is a statement of unconditional insight into the true structure of reality (Vattimo, 2005a, p. 57, 96). The weak thinking is the kind of thinking which does not claim to be an expression of absolute truth and therefore permits a plurality of interpretations of the world. The two types of strong thinking – modern thinking and the negative nihilism, respectively – are among the objects of Vattimo's criticism.

Vattimo's critique of culture is thus, on the one hand, aimed at the strong thinking, which since the beginning of modernity has been characterized by a linear and progressive conception of history, where the western world has been perceived as the culmination of the evolution of humanity. That is, Vattimo does not believe in progress or enlightenment in the sense of a linear process, where the rationalization and the accumulation of truth (i.e. scientific and technological advances) lead to or are independently to be considered human progress. On the contrary, modern rationality has – in the perspective of Vattimo – historically proven to result in a suspension of the subject it was brought about to serve. In the same manner, it has been exactly the strong *certainty* of an elevated insight in universal and objective values that has legitimized the fact that the West has *"felt itself called upon to civilize, as well as colonize, convert, and subdue, all the other peoples with whom it came in contact*" (Vattimo, 2004, p. 21; Vattimo, 2005a, p. 72ff, 138). In Vattimo's version of the history of modernity, which is inextricably linked to his critique of culture, it is modern history which has made a radical doubt in the necessary connection between enlightenment and human emancipation possible, and thus created the conditions of possibility for a *post-modern* philosophy which refuses the existence of universal and ahistorical first principles (Vattimo, 2005a, p. 99ff, 108-109). It is, however, of crucial importance to Vattimo that the historical attempts to establish a non-metaphysical thinking does not end in what he calls "negative nihilism"*;* that is, a perspective where nothing can be said to have any value. More specifically, negative nihilism draws the conclusion from the *death of God* – i.e. from the absence of a universal meta-ethical criterion, in reference to which a true ethics can be derived – that all valuation and all normativity is of arbitrary character, and that, therefore, all justifications in principle refer to nothing or are based on random assertions, the negations of which could have an equal claim to truth. Nevertheless, Vattimo insists that nihilism will undermine itself if it is thought through.

Weak thinking

With the weak thinking, Vattimo attempts to walk the thin line between the extremes described above: blinkered fundamentalism and negative nihilism. Weak thinking means, in broad outlines, to accept that "with the end of metaphysics we are not attaining a truer vision of reality – that would be metaphysics" (Vattimo, 2004, p. 32). Or, in other words, it means to acknowledge that metaphysics can never be overcome in a manner that does not imply a simultaneous reinstallation of a new metaphysics. According to Vattimo, one must instead accept that our understandings always are historico-culturally tied interpretations, and that hermeneutics itself is an interpretation, and thus cannot be made a universal foundation. On this view, we will never get rid of our historical baggage and must therefore endure and come to terms with our metaphysical heritage, our culture and history, on the background of which our understanding is based, and, at the same time, become conscious that these could have been different and that even this difference could have been otherwise[5] (Vattimo, 2005a, p. 95, 98). In light of both the radical absence of a certain foundation of knowledge and ethics, and in light of the indispensability of both, Vattimo points towards what he terms "faith". Faith or "belief" can be understood as a weak parallel to unconditional insight in the sense that it enables one to put forward an understanding of the world, without simultaneously implying that it could not be otherwise. Faith is to choose to regard as truth, or not being able not to believe in, while knowing that one cannot chose freely, but is somehow bound to one's historical and cultural heritage (Vattimo, 2005a, p. 101ff). Thus, in Vattimo's view, the answer to the opening question – "How is it possible to understand ethics and emancipation after the death of God?" – is: on the basis of faith. Furthermore, in the eyes of Vattimo, faith points back towards humanity and the immanent potentiality of *putting value into the world* by oneself, which is synonymous with the positive nihilism, the 'superman' and the conditions for the possibility of emancipation (Vattimo, 2005a, p. 111-113). In the case of Vattimo himself, he is managing heritage from Roman Catholic Christianity, Marxist Communism and Philosophical Hermeneutics (Nielsen, 2005, p. 10; Vattimo, 1999; Vattimo & Zabala, 2011). The weakening of thinking nevertheless means that the task of philosophy – as historicity is taken seriously and the project of uncovering the eternal truth is called off – becomes that of being occupied with the finite and particular, the transitory and perishable. The validity of philosophical answers must thus be evaluated by those who ask the questions, and must – when it comes to their status – also be considered as provisional and temporary, as every new generation must formulate and answer the

questions of particular relevance to their respective era (Vattimo, 2005a, p. 65ff; Nielsen, 2005a, p. 19).

2. Discourse theory

The theoretical work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe is an attempt to reopen an analytical as well as emancipatory perspective, in a world where the distance between the teleological Marxist teachings regarding the end of history and the actual historical developments of modernity seems to be growing greater and greater; that is, where the belief that the societal contradictions through class struggle with historical necessity will lead to the realization of the utopia of the classless communist society is increasingly difficult to sustain (Boucher, 2008, p. 1-4; Clausen et al., 2002, p. 15-19; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, 149-193). More specifically, Laclau and Mouffe wish to break with all theoretical frames of explanation that operate with logics of necessity or determination, and instead to develop an apparatus of concepts which enables them to frame matters of political opposition and social transformation in terms of contingency (Clausen et al., 2002, p. 15; Mouffe, 1997a, p. 22-23). Contingency here refers to something that could have been different and that makes the specific historical structuring in itself the pivotal point of the (meta-)political struggle(s)

(Laclau & Mouffe, 2002, p. 19ff). These efforts are carried out as a social constructivist *discourse theory.*

In the early phases of the development of this theory, Laclau and Mouffe draw on the Marxist legacies of both Antonio Gramsci and Louis Pierre Althusser, while also – implicitly and explicitly – trying to cut their ties to this legacy (Boucher, 2008, p. 7ff; Butler et al., 2000, p. 2). Both Gramsci and Althusser are, in the eyes of Laclau and Mouffe, favourable due to fact that both of them refuse the variants of the Marxist cosmology in which the economic conditions are omni-determining and where the superstructure is therefore reduced to a function of the material basis, or is perceived of as a detached and random epiphenomenon with no actual influence on the end of history (Boucher, 2008, p. 7-22). Nevertheless neither Gramsci nor Althusser are, according to Laclau and Mouffe, radical enough in their break with the model of structure/superstructure, inasmuch as they only attribute the phenomena of the superstructure a relative autonomy (Mouffe, 1997b, Mouffe, 1997c). In contrast to Gramsci and Althusser, the theoretical perspective of Laclau and Mouffe contains a break with the model of structure /superstructure, including in particular a break with the distinction between economy and ideology, which they describe as having an ideological character itself. Discourse theory can thus be understood as a continuation of the Marxist critique of ideology, but with the crucial difference that Vladimir Lenin's theory of reflection[6] – that is, the conception that the objective of scientific socialism's critique of ideology is the dissolving of *false consciousness* and the establishment of a 1:1 correspondence between the *objective* reality and the *scientific* knowledge – are rejected *qua* rejection of an extra-ideological objective base (Laclau & Mouffe, 1997, p. 21ff, 33ff).

This rejection, however, implies a break with the simple notion of *class* as an ontological category and the idea of the classes' objective interests and conflicts of interests, in favour of

a perception that emphasizes the historical construction of political subjects and the impossibility of a notion of interests detached from the constituted subjectivities (Laclau & Mouffe, 2002, p. 15ff). The field of inquiry of discourse theory is, in contrast, the endeavours for hegemony; that is, the struggle to construct specific forms of subjectivity and to constitute reality in a certain way, and the consequences of this for social practices.

In the late phases of the development of Laclau and Mouffe's theory, the Marxist vocabulary is, to a large extent, substituted by an apparatus of concepts that revolves around the concept of discourse from Michel Foucault's theories of the dispositive and the knowledge/power-relation. At the same time, they incorporate concepts and perspectives from Jacques Derrida's deconstructivism and Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis into their theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2002, p. 15, 21; Butler et. al., 2000, p. 2-3). In simple terms, the most important insight Lacalu and Mouffe adopt from Foucault is the idea that the description of the world is neither objective nor neutral, but, on the contrary, is an historical product and has comprehensive normative implications; power is exactly naturalization and neutralization of 'knowledge' and the related structuring of the human space for thought and action. Laclau and Mouffe, however, dismiss Foucault's conception of the existence of anything extra-discursive, on the grounds that a distinction between discursive and non-discursive must itself be of a discursive nature (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 105-106). The ontological level is – in the theory of Laclau and Mouffe – a pure abstraction, to which they refer as the "discursive field". As the name indicates, this field consists of pure discourse and is understood as a continuously flowing pulp of meaning(s), a surplus of meaning. The discursive field *is* not, inasmuch as it is not something. This empty *existence* only becomes sensible and meaningful *being*, as a result of the discursive mediation. The discursive mediation is instituted and shaped by the social process of *articulation,*[7] which connects and modifies elements of the flowing meaning in *discourses* through the construction and fixation of *nodal points*. The flowing of meaning is thus restricted and certain meanings are temporarily fixed (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 113). The processes of articulation therefore (re)construct the social reality:

though the incorporation of meaning(s) into discourses – and the incorporation of discourses into discursive formation – all identity is constituted: objects, phenomena, subjects, relations, actions etc. (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 105, 107; Laclau & Mouffe, 2002, p. 52ff, 64; Torfing, 1999, p. 92; Thomsen, 2007, p. 183-84; Hansen, 2004, p. 392-394). Laclau and Mouffe's concept of discourse is a broad concept that encompasses three dimensions: a) The verbal representations or concrete articulations – *language* and its usage, b) the *objects,* the identity of which the articulation constructs, and, c) the *actions*, relations and interactions, which, on the one hand, are made possible by a given articulation and, on the other hand, constitute and themselves make up the (re)articulations (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 105-108; Thomsen, 2007, p. 181-182). One of Laclau and Mouffe's central points is that every articulation is an implicit exclusion of other possible meanings apart from the one articulated (Hansen, 2004, p. 401-02). The articulative practice – and thereby the discursive mediation of the world – are therefore of decisive importance for the arrangement of the human spaces of thought and action. Put another way, the discursive construction of the world makes possible and normalizes certain forms of social patterns of action and excludes and delegitimizes others. Power is therefore inevitably implied in all discursive practices (Hansen, 2004, p. 401-02). The discourses are, however, not solely a restriction of possible thoughts and actions. They also serve to condition what there *is* and how it *is,* and therefore they give – or rather are – the meaning and sense of the social reality in which human beings live together.

Another of the substantial points is that discourses never becomes completely fixed or static, but on the contrary, are continuously *dislocated* and thus can be made the object of new rearticulations (Hansen, 2004, p. 394-395). No discourse can close itself around itself to a large enough extent that it unambiguously determines how the social reality is constructed and what social practices are made possible (ibid. p. 395). Structural dislocation and principal undesirability differentiate discourse theory from deterministic structuralism, because it operates within a space where *change* – as a result of decision – is not only possible but required (ibid. p. 395). Discourse theory however does not employ a classical concept of

agency. It is not the intentional human individual who makes these decisions (Laclau & Mouffe, 2002, p. 115). The *subject* in discourse theory is the *need to transcend* the absence, distance and imperfection in the discourses that the absence, distance and imperfection institute themselves (Laclau, 1990, p. 33 according to Hansen, 2004, p. 396-97).

3. Comparison

In negative terms it is relatively easy to identify a series of 'essential' common features of Laclau and Mouffe´s *discourse theory* and Gianni Vattimo's *weak thought.* Both perspectives present themselves as alternatives to or even rejections of essentialist thought. That is, both perspectives deny that phenomena or objects have actual or authentic, intrinsic and contextless substance or meaning, which is the same as saying: there is no objective real world behind or beneath, external to and independent of appearance or understanding that could be represented more or less adequately or that philosophical speculation, scientific method – or for that matter, religious revelation – could recognize, discover or deduce. The concepts of knowledge of both discourse theory and weak thought thus contrast with the correspondence theory of truth, where truth is understood as the establishment of a linguistic 1:1 representation of reality. Instead both theories operate with the idea that the meaning of

phenomena is contingent and identity is dependent on the historical and socio-cultural context. The common leitmotif can thus be said to be: *where we thought being was, nothing appeared to be.* Both positions are in other words – more or less elegant – renunciations of the distinction between ontology/epistemology and the dualism of subject/object. That is, they both, to a large extent, refuse to distinguish between being and human perception. Nevertheless Laclau and Mouffe and Vattimo address the break with these categories very differently.

The approach of Laclau and Mouffe can be explained as ascribing privilege to epistemology, which leads to an emptying of ontology. Their preliminary assumption is, as mentioned, that everything is discursively mediated, that is a product of articulation.[8] In this conception, this means that identity is constituted through verbal 'putting-into-words', and that *essence / materiality / objectivity* are things that are constructed and thus do not refer to – that which is constituted as – an object's intrinsic nature. Instead, these refer to something which is external to constructed identities. Even though Laclau and Mouffe explicate that nothing exists *outside* of discourses[9], they nevertheless address the extra-discursive, both implicitly and explicitly, all the same. It is ambiguous, in other words, precisely what status the ontological level has in their theory: on the one hand, they present their foundation as an empty ontology or an ontological absence, only characterized by its non-presence, but nevertheless playing a central (but obscure) role in regard to the articulative practices' 'discursivating' function and the discursive formation's concrete 'structurization'[10]. On the other hand, Laclau and Mouffe at times describe the extra-discursive as *the field of discursivity,* and address it as a regular and bubbling surplus of meaning – a sizzling mire – composing the unrestricted raw material, rendering a (re)articulative formation of specific identity possible through the excluding establishment of dissimilarity with other possible identities.

Vattimo's mode of breaking with the distinction between object and subject is remarkably different from Laclau and Mouffe's approach. First, one major difference consists in Vattimo claiming that we are *already out with the things*, whereas Laclau and Mouffe argue that the objects are constituted linguistically, and therefore *are already with us*, to the extent that language refers to humans.[11] Secondly, instead of the concept of an empty ontology, Vattimo works with an idea of a weak or weakened ontology. Where the ontological absence with Laclau and Mouffe is presented as a metaphysical fact and – with the vocabulary of Vattimo – as an expression of strong thinking, Vattimo argues that the best one can do is to refrain from insisting upon reaching a final conclusion about the world and to regard the weakening as an ongoing process instead of a condition. Acknowledging that one is always addressing the world and being (linguistically and interpreting), he instead recommends that we come to terms with the always provisional, imperfect and fragile character of our interpretations of the world. The result, however, is close to that of *discourses being dislocated by definition, and therefore always only temporary fixations of meaning and sense,* but has the character of an ideal more than a description.

In spite of the similarities between Laclau & Mouffe and Vattimo there is a relatively large difference in the implications of their respective theories: with Laclau and Mouffe the contingency and flowing of meaning are presented as an historical condition. In the perspective of Vattimo historicity is historical itself, which has two notable implications. On the one hand, it is possible that *being* at an historical moment had an objective, universal and ahistorical character, but due to an event – that can only be understood in terms of miraculous creation-from-nothing – retroactively has become historically variable. Vattimo is, in other words, implicitly working with a notion of *inverted causality.* It is, on the other hand, possible that historicity itself one day will become historical, in the sense of a re-'essentialization' of being, which in the terminology of Vattimo is referred to as nihilism's inherent possibility of a reopening towards being (Vattimo, 2005a, p. 76-78).

The absence of a metaphysical foundation

Both Laclau's and Mouffe's discourse theory and Vattimo's weak thinking investigate the possibilities of establishing a meaningful (post/un-metaphysical) concept of knowledge, in the light of their respective emphasis of the inaccessibility of a universal, ahistorical and cross-cultural foundation for knowledge and cognition. However, where Laclau and Mouffe stop with the recognition that the foundational categories of understanding are contingent and that the conditions of possibility of cognition therefore are always changeable, Vattimo is not satisfied with the conclusion that there is *no* foundation. From his point of view, not even the absence of a foundation can be considered a certain and firm foundation that can provide the basis for our (lack of) knowledge. Thus, Laclau and Mouffe can be regarded as exponents of a *post- / last metaphysic,* or *the absolute meta-theory,* while Vattimo has abandoned the efforts to overcome metaphysics and accepted that weakening or continuing "*wervindung*" of metaphysics is the closest to non-metaphysical thinking we will get[12].

Central categories: discourse and interpretation

Common to the concepts of discourse and interpretation is the fact that both are all-

embracing meta-categories, encompassing all meaning and sense: 'There is nothing outside of the discourses; everything is interpretation'. There are nevertheless a series of differences in terminology and connotations. A discourse is a product of articulation(s), and therefore it always has a linguistic dimension.[13] Apart from the concrete (non-)verbal expressions, discourses also encompasses both the objects, phenomena, relations etc., the identity of which they constitute, and the frames of human (rearticulative) practices. Even though it might seem that articulation/practice presupposes a subject capable of speech, action and speech-action, the concept of discourse is however over- or extra-subjective, in the sense that it is not directly linked to individuals: the discourse has priority over, precedes and constitutes the subject's positions, in reference to which speech as well as action is possible. In comparison, Vattimo's concept of interpretation is way more related to the single individuals, or stated more precisely, to 'Dasein' (the being characterized by raising questions towards its own being and – which is the most important in this connection – by definition are in the world with others). Interpretation is thus carried out on an individual level, but presupposes that others *are* and that mutual understanding, to begin with, is both possible and the case. An interpreting approach to the world is regarded as a feature of the human mode of being[14], which nevertheless could have been otherwise because the historicity – with Vattimo – precedes human interpretation, in such a manner that the descriptions of the human mode of interpretation in themselves are an interpretation, which (only) are possible in a certain historical context[15].

Overall, Vattimo's terminology is less formalistic and less analytic than Laclau and Mouffe's elaborations on discourses. Yet another difference consists in the concept of interpretation not focusing on – but neither excluding – linguistic-verbal ascribing of meaning, but to a large extent referring to the process of thinking as the main level of creating meaning. Summarily, it can be said that both discursive mediation and interpretation are categories concerned with historical and particular humans' relationships to a world, which is not independent from them. The terms also differ from each other, due to the fact that hermeneutics has a

conception of the subject that, to a wider extend than discourse theory, is tied to the individual human. There are, however, also subtle indications of the opposite: in statements such as 'the reality is a social construction', *being* is indirectly described or located as a man-made product, while terms and phrases from the vocabulary of hermeneutics such as 'being drifts its essence', 'being happens' or 'being vicissitude itself' can be said to place the shaping of phenomena beyond human influence. It can be argued that, whereas articulation is performed *by* someone, meaning and sense exist *for* someone; discourses are something one *identifies* or *(re)constructs,* while interpretation is something one *carries out*.

Common to Vattimo's and Laclau & Mouffe's perspectives is the idea that, even though the being of the world is not independent of, but on the contrary intimately connected to human understanding, there are relatively narrow bounds to how the world can be respectively interpreted or articulated meaningfully. With Laclau and Mouffe, the bounds of articulation are referred to as the linguistic structures, and even though the concrete usage of language always modifies the language system as a whole, the question about which discourses win the hegemonic struggles, and therefore constitute the frames and conditions of possibility for rearticulation, is a question of different projects' relative strengths. With Vattimo, the bounds of which interpretations can be made meaningfully are decided by the historical-cultural heritage, of which there always are different ways to manage; one out-throws one's thrownness.

Change: ‘The management of heritage’ and ‘the struggle for hegemony’

Development or dynamic – that is, the reconstruction and transformation of reality over time – is, in the theory of Laclau and Mouffe, a result of competing discursive projects’ struggle for hegemony. That being said, two provisions are of importance to the question on the premises for transformation of discourses. First, by virtue of the *relational constitution of identity*, every modification of a moment in a given discourse will change all other parts of a discourse and is therefore a radical change of the structural whole. Second, as a result of the *structural dislocation* it is, in the view of Laclau and Mouffe, a formal impossibility that a discourse would close itself upon itself, i.e. becoming final and once and for all constituting the world in one certain way. In other words, dominance, as the term is employed by Foucault, is never possible. This implicates that change as such is a structural inevitability, even though no specific development is a necessary product of intra-discursive logic or dynamics. When something appears, or rather becomes constituted, as an exigency or (logical) necessity, it is the result of one out of several possible decisions having won hegemony at the expense of alternative routes of development. Furthermore, this means that nothing (by nature) is reducible to something else or can be viewed as a random expression of an immutable root principle. In Laclau’s and Mouffe’s elaborations of this, they refer to both the surplus of meaning, as well as to the ontological absence: on the one hand, it seems like the ontological is richer that its symbolization / articulation, and thus partially escape fixation, which is why new articulations always can constitute a new object. On the other hand, it is due to the chronic imperfections, that no ‘discursivation’ can become permanent and unchallenged. When it comes to the question of *who* – that is, what subjects – there, in the cosmos of discourse theory, is struggling for hegemony, it is easier to answer in negative then in positive terms. It is neither individuals nor collective subjects, as, for example, persons or classes, but, rather, a *decentralized subject,* a plural swarm, a multitude of motions structured around contingent points of conflict.

In contrast to Laclau and Mouffe, Vattimo does not attempt to sketch out universal rules or conditions for change, but notes that the 'diversity of interpretations' and the 'epochal character of reality' occur in this historical epoch. Whereas Vattimo address historical development in terms of managing, out-throwing of new projects and opening of new horizons, Laclau and Mouffe address it in terms of struggle or competition and exclusions of alternative constructions of the world. Vattimo operates, as mentioned – to the degree of which he addresses the dynamics of history – within the possibility of a reopening towards being.

Merging of horizons and antagonisms

Whereas the concepts of discourse and interpretation, as shown, share a series of similarities, there is a great difference between how the relations between, respectively, discourse and discourse, and interpretation and interpretation are presented and viewed in discourse theory and hermeneutics. Laclau and Mouffe theorize over the inter-discursive relations in terms of *antagonism* and *equivalence* (Laclau & Mouffe, 2002, p. 74-84), while one in hermeneutics often works with a conception of the possibility of the *fusion of horizons.* We are, in other words, dealing with a conflict and a consensus perspective respectively. A fusion of horizons would, in the perspective of Laclau and Mouffe, be an expression of political hegemony; a situation where a set of particular understandings and interests have been made a common project. In her later works, Mouffe, however, begins to operate with the concept of *agonism* (a relation of conflict where the positions do not necessarily prevent

each other's realization), in order to have a positive ideal for political / democratic negation (Laclau & Mouffe, 2002, p. 15, 30-31, 185ff). Vattimo, on the other hand, points out that a plurality of perspectives cannot necessarily be equaled with peaceful coexistence, but on the contrary can be the cause of conflicts (Vattimo, 2005a, p. 97).

After truth: politics and ethics

The question of what happens when truth is no longer considered the yardstick for, but rather the product of scientific work, is central to both Vattimo's and Laclau's & Mouffe's work, but is answered differently in the two theories. In the perspective established by Laclau and Mouffe, the focus is on the political implications of the articulation instead of the truth-value of a given discourse. Under the discourse-theoretical perspective, the political is comprised of the structuring and constitution of society (the social), and is thus not a social subsystem or autonomous superstructure. Instead it is that which institutes the social as such (Laclau, 1996, p. 47-48). That is to say, the political is the implication of the way in which the social reality is constructed and especially what forms of practices (actions, thoughts, wills, relations etc,), to begin with, are rendered (im)possible and, on the second pass, (de)legitimized or (de)naturalized. The actual political struggle or negotiation is therefore the question about how interests or wills (and their possible objects) are constituted in the social. It can be argued that Laclau's and Mouffe's discourse theory focuses indirectly upon the power struggle over the distribution of resources in the broadest possible sense (that being food, shelter, recognition, education, etc. and everything else that can be perceived of as

desirable). Yet with a strict reservation: the question of interests and desire cannot be understood independently of the forms of subjectivity connected to the subject positions as they are constituted and made possible within the frames of a concrete formation of discourses. The standard for evaluation of knowledge is thus not truth, but rather *justice.* Nevertheless, there is no theoretical and general definition of justice; there is no universal meta-perspective. On the other hand, there is neither any concrete sociality, where particular interests, conflicts and struggles for hegemony between a plurality of possible decisions are not instituted (Laclau1996:48-50). The hermeneutics of Vattimo operate, as described above, not with truth as a criterion for evaluation of the 'quality' of different interpretations. Instead it focuses on the question of ethics. The challenge, to make a short summary, to a weak or non-metaphysical thinking of ethics is, that it – as it fully accepts the historicity – cannot lead to the formulation of universal ethical principals or general imperatives (Vattimo, 2005a, p. 101). Instead, one is left with a 'demand' to put value into the world oneself, and by oneself to find out how to act in concrete situations. In addition, such a thinking implies a skeptic attitude towards imperatives which *"pretend to present itself a final and universal principle"* (Vattimo, 2005a, p. 112-115, own translation) as well as an awareness that not even one's skepticism towards metaphysical legitimization is universal nor recommendable at all times, because it also builds upon a socio-cultural and historical ideal (Vattimo, 2005a, p. 112-115). The weak thinking is thus putting forward a conception of ethics as an adducing of historic-cultural prejudice. Or said differently: Ethics is a *managing of that, which one always-already is.* In this perspective, the idea of 'neutral' behavior is an absurdity and the scientific ideal of objective or purely descriptive statements about the world is undermined, in favor of an attempt to realize that descriptions always have normative implications. Thinking always also shapes and opens a normative space.

4. Freedom after truth

Weak hinking and discourse theory are – as they find expression with, respectively, Vattimo and Laclau & Mouffe – philosophical systems which undermine the basis of the project of Enlightenment, or better, the emancipatory horizon of the modern epoch. If the politico-ethical dimension of the enlightenment is interpreted as an ambition to realize the inner principle of the world, to acquire true and ahistorical knowledge corresponding to the nature of reality and the natural laws governing the material world, and then – when humanity have thrown away the veil of ignorance – hereby have the basis of a rational approach to the world (that is, an approach not being muddled by religious myths, unenlightened superstition and irrational emotions[16]), it becomes overt that the dismissal of the possibility of absolute truth demands a rethinking of the idea of human emancipation: Without an ahistorical anthropology, no rational and scientific social critique; Without a universal moral, no general ethical imperatives; Without context-independent value, no objective justice. That said, both discourse theory and weak thinking agree that what Laclau refers to as 'the rejection of the *myth of foundation*' and Vattimo calls '*the weakening of the thinking'* or *'rethinking of being in weak terms'* is not necessarily synonymous with nihilism in the negative sense of the term (i.e. abolition of value as such and impossibility of political engagement). On the contrary, they argue that the rejection of the Enlightenment's understanding of history and the concept of knowledge are actually strengthening the political dimensions of the Enlightenment project, and reopen the emancipatory horizons associated therewith. More specifically, they argue that:

A) as totalitarian force is exercised with reference to universal absolutes, the absence of metaphysical first principles could be the 'foundation' of a radical and plural democracy, where the discussions cannot be brought forth by referring to the truth, but instead must be

influenced by a mutual respect of each other's perspectives (Vattimo, 2005a, p. 85; Laclau & Mouffe, 2002, p. 112, 120);

B) the dismissal of the belief in the possibility of a final foundation of ethical and political practice gives a consciousness about our values not being matter of course or natural, but rather an expression of decision and faith, and thus requires an ongoing managing and defense.

There are, nevertheless, many obstacles for an attempt to establish a post-metaphysical thinking. If one tries to overcome metaphysics once and for all, one will inevitably come in a situation where "*something that should have been thrown overboard, will be smuggled back in*" [17]; where the abolition of one metaphysical foundation implicitly reinstalls another. If 'postmodernism' should not become the 'Pharisees' reappearance in a world without gods', philosophy must accept never to get rid of metaphysics; never to establish an ultimate meta-perspective. The ambitions are, in other words, not to stop using words such as *is* or *truth,* but instead to render it unimportant whether they are said or not. Concretely, discourse theory – as Laclau and Mouffe have contributed to develop it – contributes with analytical tools, which can be operationalized to denaturalize and unontologize contingent phenomena and the related forms of power. However, this unavoidably implies a (re)construction, a new discursive mediation. The new scientific ideal is thus – as Vattimo encourages – to attempt to become conscious about the ethical and political implications of what one is replacing the old with.

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[1]Among the most obvious examples – which I however will restrict myself from dealing with here – could be mentioned Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty (Mouffe, 1996, p. 1).

[2]

"*From now on, (...) let us protect ourselves better from the dangerous old conceptual fantasy which posits a "pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject of cognition," let's guard ourselves against the tentacles of such contradictory ideas as "pure reason," "absolute spirituality," "knowledge in itself"—those things which demand that we imagine an eye which simply can't be imagined, an eye without any direction at all, in which the active and interpretative forces are supposed to stop or be absent—the very things through which seeing first becomes seeing something. Hence these things always demand from the eye something conceptually empty and absurd. The only seeing we have is seeing from a perspective; the only knowledge we have is knowledge from a perspective"* (Nietzsche, 1993, p. 130).

[3]

(Nietzsche, 1997, p. 125-126 & Nietzsche, 1994, p. 42-43)

[4]

(Nietzsche, 2003, p. 139)

[5]

In his attempts to work with the problem of the impossibility of overcoming metaphysics, Vattimo employs Heidegger's notion of *Verwindung* as a weak alternative to *Überwindung* (overcoming) (Vattimo, 2005a, p. 95).

[6]

(Farveholt, 1978; Lenin, 1975)

[7]

Articulation thus denotes not only verbal ’putting-into-words’ and conceptualization, bur also non-verbal ’putting-into-signs’ and quantitative ’putting-into-numbers’ (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 105ff).

[8]

”Every object, every possible entity is articulated all the way through. No core or layer avoids the modifications of the articulations” (Hansen, 2004, p. 393, own translation)

[9]

A distinction between discursive and unmediated is, in the view of Laclau and Mouffe, in itself having a discursive character. The distinguishing between the material and the immaterial, idea and reality is likewise in itself a product of a specific discursive mediation. *Discourse* is thus a meta-category, which according to Laclau and Mouffe cannot be placed within the traditional dualisms of realism/idealism and materialism/idealism (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 108-111).

[10]

In accordance with for example the concept of *empty signifiers* (Laclau & Mouffe, 2002, p. 121-122, 135ff).

[11]

However, this is not necessarily the case because the discourse is primary to and constitutes the subject positions, such as Human (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 114ff).

[12]

Even though Laclau and Mouffe explicitly states that discourse theory is not founded metaphysically (Mouffe, 1996; Laclau and Mouffe, 2002, p. 22) I have not been able to find anywhere in their authorship, where they – in the light of discourse theory's (own) implications – have looked self-critically and reflexively on the question of discoursetheory's (metaphysical) status. This is one of the reasons why I am arguing in favour of a synthesis or mutual inspiration of discourse theory and weak thinking.

[13]

Laclau and Mouffe expand both the concept of articulation and concept of discourse so much that they do not only encompass verbal language, but the creation of meaning and sense in general.

[14]

It is not hereby said that humans cannot misunderstand or consciously mislead one another. What is said is that the problem of the psychology of the alien / the problem of solipsism, as a general problem is to be considered a pseudo problem.

[15]

In line with “The epochal essence of being” (Heidegger, 2002, p. 52)

[16]

[17] *"The post-modern discourse reproduce the 'logic of foundation', which professedly is the main characteristic of modernity*" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2002, p. 104, own translation)