Truth, Discourse, and Hegemony: A Poststructuralist Perspective on the Post-Truth Condition

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"You look at what's happening last night, in Sweden! Sweden! Who would believe this, Sweden!" cried out Donald Trump during his first campaign-style rally since his inauguration as President of the United State the month before (Topping, 2017). The remark caused widespread confusion among his friends and enemies alike as people around the world – including in Sweden itself – wondered: what *had* happened in Sweden last night?

The answer, perhaps somewhat unsurprisingly, was *nothing* – aside from some road closures and technical problems in a singing competition (Ekman, 2017). It was eventually revealed that Trump's outburst was the result of an interview conducted by Fox News pundit Tucker Carlson with filmmaker Ami Horowitz. In the interview, the pair discussed Horowitz's documentary about possible links between high crime rate in Sweden and the country's liberal immigration policy. Carlson displayed every expression of disgust and incredulity as Horowitz told the story of a country crumbling under the strain of their naiveté, all while footage of burning cars and policemen being hit by brown-skinned men looped in the background (Fox News, 2017).

Swedish authorities were quick to debunk Horowitz's claims, and police officers that were interviewed for the documentary accused Horowitz of representing them unfairly through selective editing (Lindkvist, 2017). American right-wing media scrambled in vain to find evidence supporting Horowitz's findings, until Bill O'Reilly interviewed a man claiming to be a Swedish defense and security advisor who repeated the allegations made by Horowitz. Unfortunately, it soon turned out that the man was not what he seemed: he was actually an American ex-con by the name of Nils Tolling who had nothing to do with Sweden (Taylor, 2017). In a final twist to this confusing story, it was reported that a particularly determined Russian TV crew apparently offered some youths in a Stockholm suburb some money to riot in front of the camera (Gramer, 2017).

Washington Post columnist Anne Applebaum (2017) effectively summarized this strange chain of events as follows:

> A faked film inspired the president to cite an imaginary crisis, the existence of which was confirmed by a fake expert — and which now inspired another television team to try to create a real crisis using real people (in a neighborhood crawling with both real and fake journalists) to make it all seem true.

A Post-Truth Order?

The story of what did (not) happen in Sweden is a good example of the current state of the sociopolitical landscape in many countries across the world – one that most of us will no doubt recognize with the informational chaos surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic still fresh in our collective memory. A number of different terms have been used to describe the situation, such as “disinformation order” (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Bradshaw & Howard, 2019), “infocalypse” (Schick, 2020), “ersatz reality” (Pomerantsev, 2019), and “post-truth order” or “post-truth era” (Harsin, 2015; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Waisbord, 2021; Salgado, 2021; Consentino, 2020). Although many of these terms carry subtly different meanings, the underlying idea is similar: we live in a time in which facts matter less than opinions; good information is hard to come by; and – in the immortal words of Rudy Giuliani – “truth isn’t truth” (Pilkington, 2018).

Despite these many names, there are three initial conclusions that can be drawn: first of all, words such as “order” and “era” suggest that there is some kind of method to the madness – that we can somehow understand this as a phenomenon by itself. Second, this phenomenon is considered disruptive or at the very least contrary to the status quo. Third, examples such as the Sweden case demonstrate that we are not just dealing with a local phenomenon. It is both international in that the same kind of thing is happening across different states and transnational in that the actors involved are not necessarily confined to their domestic contexts. Because of this, I argue that we are dealing with a global phenomenon (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

But aside from these general features, what are we actually dealing with? What does this "post-truth order" as I will call it actually entail, and how does it work? A review of the literature yields lots of different concepts, practices, and development that are said to make up and contribute to the phenomenon, but an agreed-upon definition is lacking. Some of the most common features include (a) the proliferation of mis- and disinformation through (b) digital means of communication such as social media and the internet, often associated with (c) populism and the radical right, as well as with (d) illiberal authoritarian states (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Salgado, 2021; Waisbord, 2018; Consentino, 2020). Although all of these subjects have been covered extensively in their own rights, not a lot of work has been done on theorizing the vague overarching phenomenon that is suggested by the name "post-truth order'. The goal of this thesis is to – at least in part – remedy that lack. Before we get to that, however, I need to discuss the theoretical framework that I will be using to achieve that goal. At the heart of this thesis stands the poststructuralist discourse theory of the Essex School. In particular, I will be relying heavily on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, which I will cover in detail in chapter 2. Poststructuralists have often been accused of inadvertently causing the current post-truth situation, particularly by realists (Renner & Spencer, 2018; Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2019). Robert Keohane accused poststructuralism of leading to nihilism (Keohane, 1989, 392); Stephen Walt dismissed it as "self-indulgent navel-gazing" at the expense of engagement with the real world (Walt, 1999, 223); and Daniel Dennett even went as far as to call poststructuralism "truly evil" (Dennett cited in Cadwalladr, 2017).

There are multiple problems with these criticisms. Not only do they severely overestimate the reach of poststructuralist ideas with some stopping just short of arguing that Donald Trump reads Foucault (Renner and Spencer, 2018, 317) – they also rely on serious misrepresentations of poststructuralist theory. The aim of poststructuralism is not to dispose of the notion of truth altogether, but rather with the idea that there is such a thing as a permanent and immutable truth. Truth is a quality of information; the question is how that quality is attributed. For realists, this is done by determining whether or not information corresponds to external reality. For poststructuralists, however, it comes down to *how* we perceive that external reality. They claim that the categories we use to make sense of the world are dependent on contingent social processes. As such, what we consider to be true is in part socially determined, which means that multiple internally valid but externally conflicting notions of truth can exist at the same time.

I will dive deeper into the details of poststructuralist theory in the following chapter. For now, it is important to understand that our perception of the world around us is mediated by contingent, socially determined categories of identity. This poses a problem for traditional scientific reasoning, since both induction and deduction rely on a strict separation between theory and phenomenon – between our categories and the world. An answer to this problem comes in the form of *retroductive* reasoning (Howarth & Glynos, 2007). Instead of viewing the relationship between theory and empirics as a one-way affair, it should be seen as an iterative process of problematization, explanation, and persuasion. The way this works is as follows: we start off by questioning an empirical phenomenon. In doing so, we *problematize* it and turn it into an object of scientific research. We then give an explanation of the phenomenon and try to persuade the relevant scientific community that it is accurate. If accepted, that explanation then re-informs and changes the way we perceive the initial phenomenon, which then lends itself to re-problematization and explanation (Howarth & Glynos, 2007, 33-34).

As I mentioned, the goal of this thesis is to remedy the lack of theorization for the phenomenon of the post-truth order. However, I recognize that this phenomenon is far too large to cover in one book, let alone in a single Master's thesis. As such, my work should be viewed as a first step in the cycle of retroductive reasoning. The goal of my research is to problematize the phenomenon, provide an explanation, and argue for that explanation. In doing so, I want to posit the post-truth order *as* a single phenomenon, and thus as an object of further research. As such, my research question is:

> *How can we understand the post-truth order as a single, unified phenomenon or object of research?*

I intend to answer this question by analyzing two cases that I consider indicative of the post-truth order, namely those of Donald Trump and the Russian government. By comparing the results of the two analyses, I intend to demonstrate that their similar usage of the signifier of "truth" makes them part of a larger global hegemonic project as a *discourse coalition* (Hajer, 1995), which is a flexible and not necessarily planned grouping of actors whose articulations align (Nonhoff, 2019, 78). To arrive at this conclusion, this thesis will be structured as follows. In chapter 2, I will explain the poststructuralist discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, which serves as the core of my theoretical framework. Chapter 3 consists of a discussion on methodology, case selection, and the various texts that I will be using in the analysis. Chapter 4 kicks off the application part of the thesis by explaining the context and material circumstances that enable the articulations that make up the post-truth order. Chapters 5 and 6 consist of my respective analyses of Trump and Russia. Finally, in the conclusion I will answer my research question by synthesizing the analyses from the previous two chapters. I will finish by discussing some shortcomings of my thesis as well as some avenues for further research.

Chapter 2: Discourse, Poststructuralism, and Populism

As mentioned in the introduction, the goal of this chapter is to clarify the theoretical framework that serves as the foundation of my further analysis of the post-truth order, namely, the poststructuralist discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Before I move on to their particular theory, I will shortly discuss its roots, which can primarily be found in two major developments: the impasse of Marxism and the linguistic turn in the humanities and social sciences (Kolankiewicz, 2012).

Starting with the former, the *impasse of Marxism* refers to the apparent inability of conventional Marxist theory to explain some major societal developments in Europe following the Russian Revolution (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, viii). In particular, the advent of social democratic politics and the lack of revolution in countries such as Italy brought the rigid economic determinism and class identity posited by classical Marxist-Leninist theory into question. In response to this, Marxist thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci and later Louis Althusser shifted their emphasis away from class struggle at just the economic (base) level to also include the social and cultural (superstructure) level, which opened the way for more ideological and discursive analyses of social class relations.

Around the same time, the fields of the humanities, social sciences, and philosophy were experiencing a *linguistic turn*. Inspired by the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, this development challenged the dominant descriptivist paradigm concerning the relationship between language and the social realm on the one hand, and external reality on the other. Instead of the idea that language is somehow determined by external reality, it was held that language is an entirely internally determined system or "structure" that is imposed upon external reality as a way to ascribe identity and meaning to objects. This theory, known as *structuralism*, quickly became a popular way of analyzing not just language, but of culture and the social realm as a whole.

With this history in mind we can turn to the work of Laclau and Mouffe. Self-described as both post-Marxist and poststructuralist, their work constitutes an effort to advance both schools of thought (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, ix). The central theme in this endeavor is the rejection of essentialism, which entails the rejection of a central guiding principle or concept from which everything else is determined. For Marxist theory, this is the dogma of class identity. Even for Althusser and Gramsci, who both abandoned the strict economic determinism of classical Marxism, the struggle for dominance is still determined by the presence of two ultimately unalienable opposed forces in the working class and the bourgeoisie. For structuralism, which is predicated on a rejection of the determination of social structures by external reality, the central principle is found in the nature of the structure it posits: if the structure is not *externally* determined and constitutes a closed, stable system, it necessarily becomes *internally* determined as the structure predicates the analysis of everything inside it. Instead, Laclau and Mouffe posit that the whole structure of social identities is contingent and constituted through *rhetoric*. Through a process of continuous articulation and re-articulation, external objects are incorporated into an internal structure of social identity in a way that is very much akin to a Wittgensteinian language-game.[1]

In sum, Laclau and Mouffe's poststructural discourse theory is positioned at the intersection between the two theoretical traditions explained above. From Marxism, the theory derives its *explanandum*, which is the question of why and how social struggle occurs. From structuralism, it derives its *explanans* in the structure that determines social identities. However, it goes beyond both in its rejection of essentialism in favor of radical contingency, thereby placing the emphasis squarely on the practice of articulation as constitutive for social identity, and thus social struggle.

Laclau and Mouffe: a Closer Look

Now that I have contextualized it, we can move on to an in-depth exploration of the theory put forward by Laclau and Mouffe. To achieve this, I will now begin by explaining the three primary ontological categories identified by Laclau: discourse, rhetoric, and hegemony (Laclau, 2005, p.

[1] Perhaps the most famous example is that of the stone slab: A calls out the word "slab" and B delivers the slab, thereby reaffirming the connection between the word ("slab") and the activity (bringing the slab) – which is what constitutes 'meaning' in this context (Wittgenstein 2010 I, §2).

67-68). After that, I will demonstrate how these categories all come into play in the phenomenon of populism. The first category is *discourse*. According to the definition of Laclau and Mouffe, discourse refers to the structured whole of articulations from which social identity is derived (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, 94-95). These identities follow the logic of Saussurean *difference,* which posits that all identity relations are negative. This means that the identity of object A lays in its difference from B, C, and so forth: A is essentially “not-everything-else”. Differential relationships such as these are posited through the previously mentioned practice of articulation, which constitutes an attempt to establish or fix the identity of an object. Laclau and Mouffe call this the process of turning “elements” (unarticulated differences) into “moments” (articulated differences).

However, this is where the aforementioned essentialism of structuralism creeps in. If this process of turning elements into moments is successful, we arrive at what is essentially a closed system of differences – an internally determined structure. But this is exactly the kind of essentialism that Laclau and Mouffe reject. Instead, the discursive structure and the identities it posits exist on the precipice between internality and externality without ever truly achieving the intended fixity of articulation: Borrowing a term from Althusser, Laclau and Mouffe call this condition *overdetermination*. The upshot of this is that the process of articulation – of turning elements into moments – is never truly finished, which leads us to the importance of our next ontological category: rhetoric.

For Laclau, *rhetoric* and the aforementioned practice of articulation fulfill a crucial role in the constitution of social identity. The reason for this is that through the act of naming a group, as well as consequent re-articulation of said group in differential terms through rhetorical practices such as substitution and comparison, that group is brought into existence as a social identity. To understand this, we first have to talk about the nature of articulation. Articulation comes in two forms: differential and equivalential. Whereas the former emphasizes the difference of two elements, the latter emphasizes the commonality or equivalence of two elements as opposed to another. The constitutive function of articulation lies with that commonality: by endowing it with a name or “signifier”, it becomes the grounds upon which the equivalence between elements comes into being.

The initial state of a newly articulated signifier is, by definition, emptiness – it is an empty signifier insofar as that it is not subordinated to a prior description or designation (Laclau, 2005, 104). This empty signifier is then "filled in" with a differential identity that connects various elements in their not-being of something else. It is important to note that this new equivalential identity does not override the differential identities of its constituents. Rather, it takes on the same quality of overdetermination in that it never manages to constitute total unity, thus prompting the need for continuous re-articulation. To clarify this, take the example of the signifier "Groningers". Although the group of objects it signifies (people who live in Groningen) is heterogeneous and its constituents can all have wildly different interests, the group "Groningers" is a still social agent with its own interests. As such, the designation "Groningers" is not just a descriptive expression but a real relation between different social agents.

The third and final ontological category is *hegemony*. Laclau and Mouffe borrow the term from Gramsci, who used it to refer to the domination of a specific class or group in all aspects of society. In discursive terms, this means that one group gets to articulate and impose a system of differential identities that suits their needs. However, this implies the *a priori* existence of the hegemonic subject as existing partially outside their own system of differences. This, in turn, would mean that complete discursive domination would also effectively deny the identity of the hegemonic subject itself as there would no longer be anything outside with which it can be differentially identified. Instead, Laclau and Mouffe view hegemony as a type of relation. Through the articulation of an all-encompassing difference, the hegemonic subject creates a common ground upon which chains of equivalence can be established: it posits an empty signifier (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, 125). This equivalence is then taken as the basis for further differential articulation, thereby forming the cornerstone of an entire network of signification. As both sides of the hegemonic relationship do this, their relationship is necessarily *antagonistic* as they both posit incommensurable systems of identity based on a stigmatization of the other. This conflict is somewhat analogous to that of two states embroiled in a border dispute. Both states have their own idea as to where the border should lie, but because these claims are at odds with each other there exists a stretch of land whose status is constantly in flux. It is along these vague and indeterminate lines that the antagonistic frontiers of two hegemonic forces are drawn.

With this, we have all the tools we need to understand populism in a Laclauian sense. First, we discussed discourse as the field wherein social identity is established through differential articulation. Then, the notion of rhetoric demonstrated how through the act of articulation certain differences are constituted as the identities of social actors. Finally, hegemony concerns the way in which systems of signification are based upon the articulation of an all-encompassing set of differences that serve as the grounds for equivalences among different elements.

Laclau and Populism

Now we turn to the question of how these categories combine in the practice of populism. As the following few paragraphs will demonstrate, Laclau does not regard populism as a particular type of movement but as a *political logic* (Laclau, 2005, p. 117). This means that populist reason and practice are not, as many scholars argue, a fringe phenomenon (Stavrakakis, 2017) but rather an essential component of the practice of politics in general. This is also the conclusion upon which I will base my analysis of the disinformation order in the rest of this thesis.

To begin, Laclau takes the category of "social demand" as his minimal unit of analysis. A demand, meaning a request for or claim to something, already implies equivalence between differential elements in the form of a constitutive lack of something, a need. This need can be the result of various developments, both material and ideological: for example, a mass migration from the countryside to the city would generate a multitude of needs such as housing, food, infrastructure, etc. Furthermore, this demand is directed at someone or something, thereby immediately sowing the seeds of a differential relationship. If the demand is satisfied, the differential relationship with the ones at which the demand was directed disappears, as well as the basis for the equivalence between those sharing the demand.

If it is *not* satisfied, however, it becomes what Laclau calls a *democratic demand* – that is, a demand to the powers that be emerging from society (Laclau, 2005,74; 125). At this point, the democratic demands operate under the logic of difference, as they remain isolated from each other: the demands of factory workers remain separate from the demands of impoverished farmers. However, one such democratic demand can become so broadly shared that it outgrows its initial differential identity and comes to represent a much larger array of demands. At this point, it can be articulated as a *popular demand*. This popular demand can eventually become symbolic of an entire movement: it becomes an empty signifier upon which a chain of equivalence between various other demands can be articulated based on their common opposition to the “antagonistic Other” from which this new popular identity is then differentiated – “The People” versus “The Elite”, “The Workers” versus The “Bourgeoisie”, and so forth.

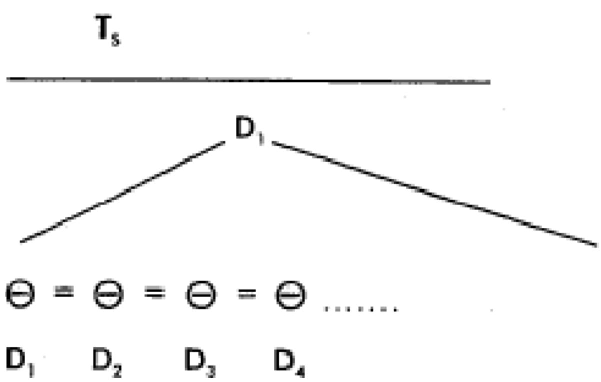

Figure 1.1 Visualization of a chain of equivalences under an empty signifier (Laclau, 2005, 130).

At this point, the popular identity becomes hegemonic in the sense that it posits a universality of identity: you are either with us, or against us. All particular demands are brought together as a chain of equivalence under the banner of a single popular demand that loses its own particularity in the process and therefore becomes an empty signifier. In figure 1.1, D(1-4) represent particular democratic demands brought together under the empty signifier D(1). T(s) represents the antagonistic Other from which D(1) derives its differential identity.

This is the essence of populist reason: the construction of a chain of equivalences under an empty signifier. However, this is still an abstraction as there are two important additions to be made. Firstly, the frontier between the popular identity D(1) and the antagonistic other T(s) is not stable. If it were, the universality posited by the popular identity would be accurate thereby resulting yet again in a closed system. In reality, *both sides are hegemonic in that they posit a mutually incommensurable universality and thus their own antagonistic frontiers.* Going back to the border region analogy from earlier, there exists a contested space between the two where neither truly holds sway. This means that signifiers claimed by both are subjected to a tug-of-war in which both sides attempt to establish *their* category as definitive – these signifiers are called *floating signifiers*. In figure 1.2, the hard line from figure 1 is replaced by two dotted lines to represent the two different antagonistic frontiers. As we can see, D(1/a) is now part of both chains of equivalence: it has become a floating signifier subject to different identities based on two different hegemonic articulations.

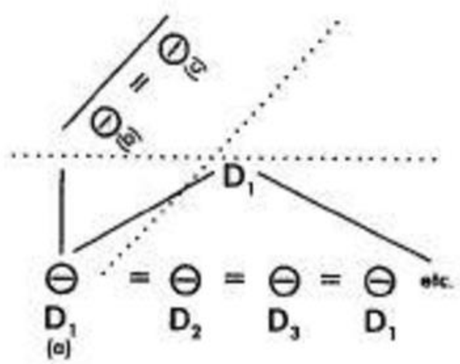

Figure 1.2 Competing chains of equivalences and floating signifiers (Laclau, 2005, 131).

Secondly, the assumption up until now has been that all democratic demands can somehow be incorporated into chains of equivalence. However, this would once again lead us to a closed system quite similar to Gramsci's in which two opposing forces struggle for control. Instead, there are demands that are *heterogeneous* to the struggle for hegemony. These are demands that are not represented by either hegemonic articulation. The reason for this could be that there is simply no place for them in the system, or because they do not exist yet. In this way, Laclau accounts for the possibility of radical change: populism does not just involve the redefinition of existing demands, but also the incorporation of new demands and the exclusion of old demands (Laclau, 2005, 153-154). As figure 1.3 shows, heterogeneous elements (m) and (n) exist outside of the system of difference established between D(1) and T(s).

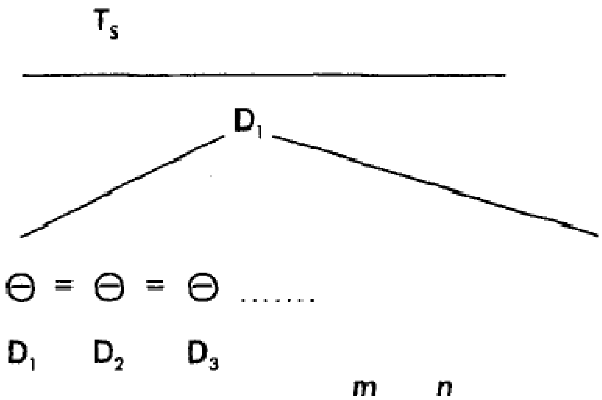

Figure 1.3 The location of heterogeneous elements (Laclau, 2005, 148).

This concludes my discussion of the poststructuralist discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe. As I have explained, populist reason is a feature inherent to the political process and social conflict in general. It accounts for and explains not only how systematic challenges to a status quo are constructed, but also how this shapes and influences our very notion of identity and the social. In the following chapter, I will discuss the methodological implications of this framework as well as how I intend to use it in my analysis of my main object of research: the post-truth order.

Chapter 3: Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis and Method

Now that most of the most important concepts and ideas of poststructuralist discourse theory have been explained we turn to the questions of methodology and research design. Unfortunately, the ontological framework of poststructuralist discourse theory is notoriously hard to operationalize due to its rather abstract and theoretical nature (Jacobs, 2018). Although attempts have been made to remedy the discipline's "methodological deficit" (Townshend, 2003) there is still no consensus on how poststructural research should be done. In many ways this reflects the opinions of one of its founding fathers, as Laclau himself has frequently disputed the need for methodology, pleading "happily guilty" (Laclau, 2004, 324) to neglecting methods and research design in favor of a form of political science more akin to philosophy (Laclau, 1991).

In spite of this methodological gap, there are plenty of scholars who have conducted poststructuralist discourse analyses of a range of topics: Laclau himself conducts a number of them near the end of *On Populist Reason* (2005), and *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis* (2000) by Norval et al. also consists of a collection of poststructuralist discourse analyses by various authors. However, due to the lack of an agreed upon set of methodological principles, every one of these analyses differs in the way that they apply the theoretical framework of poststructuralism. For instance, some prefer to include the effect of institutional and socio-economic factors in shaping discourse, whereas others stress the linguistic element and the performativity of articulation. These are referred to as "thin" and "thick" variants of discourse theory respectively (Townshend, 2003, 132-133).

The result of this variety in the way poststructuralist discourse analyses are conducted is that research design is very much dependent on the choices of the author, as well as on the specific nature of the problem at hand (Torfing, 2005). For this thesis, I will take a "thin" interpretation of the theory as my starting point, as this will allow me to incorporate some socio-economic developments into my explanation that coincided with and, as I will argue, play a key role in the articulations that make up the post-truth order. The analysis of the linguistic elements of the discourse will be structured with the concept of *logics* as put forward by Howarth and Glynos (2007) in combination with the vocabulary for hegemonic analysis provided by Martin Nonhoff (2019).

First off, the concept of a *logic* was introduced by Howarth and Glynos to replace the critical realist notion of causal mechanisms. As I explained, poststructuralist theory posits that the relation between our categories of understanding and the real world is circular in the sense that the one informs the other. Although critical realism acknowledges that the real world cannot be separated from human perception, causal mechanisms still depend on the idea of a stable relationship between the two – which poststructuralists view as a kind of essentialism. Instead, logics provide the means to explain the emergence and reproduction of discourses in a way that highlights their contingency (Howarth & Glynos, 2007, 16). This is done by examining the patterns of a particular discourse to arrive at the grammar of a discourse or the specific set of rules that governs the way it is conducted (Howarth and Glynos, 2007, 135).

There are three kinds of logic: social logics, political logics, and fantasmatic logics. Social logics constitute the basic internal rules of a discourse that characterize its general content and purpose. An example of this is the social logic of apartheid, which involved separating different races into distinct categories (Howarth & Glynos, 2007, 138). Political logics, in turn, govern the way a specific discourse is formed. The way this works is identical to the way Laclau describes populism in that it involves the construction of a chain of equivalence based on articulations of equivalence and difference. Finally, fantasmatic logics concern the way in which we engage in a discourse – or rather, why we engage. Whereas social logics make up a discourse and political logics differentiates it from others, fantasmatic logics are meant to convince us that we should embrace that particular discourse as opposed to another one (Howarth & Glynos, 2007, 108). A good way to understand this is to compare a discourse to a game such as chess (mirroring Wittgenstein's emphasis on games). Social logics are the rules of chess: they determine what pieces are, how they are moved, and how they interact; the function of political logics is to justify the existence of chess as distinct from other games such as checkers; fantasmatic logics finally serve to engage us with the game of chess, convince us to follow its rules, and make us prefer it over checkers.

With these logics in mind, it becomes easier to structure a discourse analysis as an exploration to discover the regularities of a discourse. The next question, then, is how exactly we can discover these regularities – or more importantly, where. As explained, social logics take place within a specific discourse. As such, a true analysis of social logics requires a thorough overview of a discourse in its entirety. Unfortunately, due to the limited number of cases covered in this thesis I will not be able to achieve such an overview. As such, I will mostly steer clear of social logics and merely provide some speculation about them in the conclusion. The same goes for fantasmatic logics, to which I am unfortunately unable to dedicate the space required for a thorough discussion. This leaves us with political logics as the main object of research. Because they govern the way discourses are differentiated from each other, they do not necessarily require a full perusal of both discourses. Instead, a more focused analysis of the way antagonism is established through the portrayal of the *other* discourse suffices. Even if two cases are still a rather small amount, a synthesis of the two articulations should still result in a working model, which can then later be supplemented with further relevant analyses.

Now I turn to the methods that I will use to analyze political logics. These will be mostly based on the strategies provided by Martin Nonhoff (2019). Nonhoff's method relies on the identification of various articulatory practices – or *strategemes*, as he calls them – that are indicative of a hegemonic project and the discourse coalition that comprises it. The way this works is by analyzing the various *relations* that are posited between the signifiers present in the text. For this analysis, I will only make use of the three core strategemes of hegemonic practice: (I) the articulation of equivalences between different demands made with regard to the universal (or empty signifier); (II) the antagonistic division of the discursive space; and (III) the representation of the chains of equivalences by empty signifiers as the focal point of the antagonism between the two sides (Nonhoff, 2019, 80). The goal of these three strategemes is to provide an overview of the various relations of equivalence, their congregation on an empty signifier, and the way the antagonism comes about. This means that in my analysis I will primarily be looking for articulations of equivalence and difference between signifiers. Out of these signifiers, I must then select the ones that are construed as central to their respective chains of equivalence, i.e. the representative empty signifiers. I will approach this as follows: I will start by briefly introducing the case by discussing the historical context as well as the position occupied by the articulating subject in that context. I will also give a very general overview of the format of the texts that comprise the articulation. I will then present my reconstruction of the three core hegemonic strategemes through a visual representation, which will be accompanied by an analysis of the core empty signifiers and their respective places in the discourse (Nonhoff, 2019, 89). The rest of the chapter will consist of a discussion of the most noteworthy aspects of the discourse and the signifiers that it contains.

Case Selection and Data

The final question at hand concerns the cases I selected and the data I have collected for my analysis. My case selection is based on two conditions: firstly, the subject must have made a sufficient contribution to the discourse. Secondly, this contribution must have been made from a position in which it conceivably influenced the discourse at large. In short, the subject needs to be a relevant socio-political force (Nonhoff, 2019, 86). With these conditions in mind, the first case I have chosen has as its subject Donald Trump. Trump's use of truth in his rhetoric has been well documented. His public feud with the media as well as his popularization of terms such as "fake news" and "alternative facts" have made him into a classic subject of research into post-truth practices. The fact that research on topics such as disinformation and fake news has grown explosively since the year of his election testifies to that (Freelon and Wells, 2020). Furthermore, his status as President of the United States should automatically qualify him as a socio-political force. As such, he fulfills both of my conditions. With regards to data collection, I have chosen to approach his discourse through his use of Twitter. In total, I have processed 2,166 tweets produced in the period between his announcement on the 16th of June 2016 that he was going to run for President and his expulsion from Twitter on the 8th of January 2021. I arrived at this dataset by using the following search queries: "truth", "true", "untrue", "false", "lie", "lies", "liar", "information", "disinformation", "informed", and "fake". A selection of these tweets – which I will reference as A(*n*) – can be found in the appendix.

The subject of the second case is the Russian government. It is no secret that the Russian government has been conducting large scale operations to influence the flow of information: the use of troll farms and government-owned news outlets has been a part of Russian foreign policy since at least 2005 (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014). Although it is impossible to determine the actual impact and influence of these operations, I believe that their scale combined with the overall stature of Russia warrants the fulfillment of my two conditions. Moreover, the fact that these operations take place on a global scale serves to highlight the international nature of the discourse they convey – which is exactly why I have chosen to include this case in particular. Because the discourse is almost entirely conducted through proxies, it seems natural that I approach it through the largest and most visible proxy, namely Russia Today or RT. Specifically, I will be looking at RT International, which is the English version of the service. Aside from news, RT also publishes op-eds. Although these are written by supposedly unaffiliated authors, I argue that the mere fact that RT publishes them means that they are at least in line with the service's views as a whole – and by extension of their client, the Russian government. In total, I have analyzed 60 articles written between October 14th 2021 and May 15th 2022, with one half retrieved with the search query “truth” and the other half with the query “fake news”.

Chapter 4: The Organic Crisis of the Internet

That brings us to the analysis part of this thesis. Before we move on to the cases, I will first contextualize them. I will do this by discussing some material developments that have brought about the discursive conditions in which they are embedded. In order to do this, I must first discuss the nature of change in the poststructuralist model. In chapter 2, I discussed heterogeneity as the realm of the unarticulated – that which is either left out or simply does not exist yet. However, I have yet to explain how exactly this accounts for change in practice. The following paragraphs will address this with the introduction of the concepts of “dislocation” and “organic crisis”.

First, *dislocation* refers to what happens when a phenomenon appears that is unexplainable from the perspective of the dominant discursive formation. Through this failure, we become aware of the inadequacy and incompleteness of that discursive formation and thus ultimately the radical contingency of the entire structure. This then leads to either an adjustment of said structure (re-articulation) or its replacement by another structure entirely. Either way, the phenomenon of dislocation provides an occasion for new conflicts and antagonisms. In a sense, the way this works is comparable to the way Kuhnian paradigms function: the appearance of unexplainable phenomena brings the ruling paradigm into question, which can then lead to a shift to a paradigm that is capable of explaining said phenomena.

In Laclauian terms, we can understand dislocation as the introduction of heterogeneous elements into the discursive space. As mentioned, this process happens continuously to account for changing material, social, and cultural conditions. However, there are certain periods in history in which an exceeding amount of heterogeneity rapidly enters the discursive space. In such a moment, the existing social order comes under heavy fire, which can prompt even more radical re-articulations. These periods, which are often characterized by great change, are referred to as *organic crises* by the scholarship (Laclau, 2005; Howarth & Glynos, 2007). Some periods from history are often named as examples, such as the conditions surrounding the rise of fascism in Italy, the Third Way (Ryner, 2003); or more recently Brexit (Jessop, 2017).

Towards a Global Discourse

Dislocation accounts for the ever-changing conditions for articulation. As such, it is a natural process that comes in many forms. Although that could mean the introduction of something entirely new, it often concerns something that is only new to the particular discourse it subverts. In the latter case, the object of dislocation comes to us from another discursive structure that was previously unknown to us. As such, we not only have to account for its existence in the first place but also with the meaning ascribed to it by the discourse to which it belongs. This kind of "double" dislocation is the result of what I will call a *discursive convergence*. As discussed in chapter 2, discourses function as contingent structures of meaning and social identity. In practice, this means that there are various different discourses operating simultaneously at different levels. The degree to which these discourses interact with each other (if at all) is dependent on their proximity and relevance to each other. In an extreme case of this, Native American discourses did not factor into any European discourses in the 13th century because for reasons that are obvious: there was literally no exchange between them. Chinese discourses, on the other hand, would have mattered slightly more due to trade routes; but widespread cultural exchange did not occur. In Laclauian terms, this means that the Native American discourses were entirely and the Chinese discourses were mostly heterogeneous to the European discourses at the time. As such, the dislocation caused by the discursive convergence was limited at most.

The bottom line of this argument is that we have to first encounter something before we can question its place in the world. This means that the more things we encounter, the more questions we can raise, which leads me to the current day. The world of the 21st century is different in many ways from the one people knew in the 13th century, but perhaps the biggest difference comes in terms of size. The world we know now consists of a massive, globe-spanning network of economic, political, and social connections comprising some 7.9 billion people living in 193 countries (Robertson & White, 2007); in comparison, estimations of the world population in 1250 lie around a mere 400 million with most people never leaving their own country let alone their continent. In this sense, the world has become a much bigger place. Paradoxically, however, it has also become much *smaller*: travelling to the other side of the world no longer requires a perilous month-long journey but half a month's worth of salary and a day or two of mild discomfort; foreign fruits and foods are neatly packaged and sold in your local supermarket across the street; and the complexity of global supply chains means that a labor strike in Bangladesh could impact a Brazilian farmer's choice of apparel.

The result of this "little big world" is that any given individual will encounter a great deal more things that used to be completely alien, both material objects as well as social practices, meanings, and identities. This widening discursive space and the discursive convergence it brings with it constitute a movement towards two things. Firstly, as discursive formations that were formerly limited by geographical conditions are forced to grapple with new, heterogeneous elements from all over the world, they are challenged to incorporate them – to become a *global* discursive formation. Secondly, the presence of various discursive formations in different parts of the world means that there are more voices capable of articulation, thereby opening the way for more hegemonic struggle on a global scale.

Gatekeeping and the Internet

Many of the elements that contribute to this trend towards a global discourse – international trade, cultural exchange, English as a *lingua franca* – have steadily developed over the course of the second half of the 20th century. However, with the introduction of the internet and the digital realm in the 1990s that trend has seriously accelerated. In the short span of a few decades more than half the world – some 4.57 billion people as of 2019 – has gained access to the internet; and with it, access to a (mostly) free global communication network, as well as an impossible amount of information about every subject imaginable. As a result, the little big world mentioned in the previous paragraph has become even bigger and smaller at the same time, as its vastness is now more easily accessible than ever before. Never before has it been so easy to encounter so much variety.

The advent of the internet and the digital has had a significant impact on the world in discursive terms. Due to the ease with which people across the world can now communicate with each other, the degree of discursive convergence is even higher – and so too the degree of dislocation. I argue that this warrants the title of an organic crisis, and a *global* one at that. The defining feature of this particular organic crisis – which I will call the *organic crisis of the internet* – is the loss of traditional gatekeeping. In the pre-internet age, traditional media outlets such as newspapers, television, and radio held a virtual monopoly on mass communication. Because of this privileged position, these institutions had a degree of control over the flow of information – and with it, over what could be considered true or false. However, with the introduction of the internet as an open alternative to traditional channels of mass communication, these institutions have lost their privilege and are forced to compete with other sources of information laying claim to the truth. The barriers of entry to the "truth market" (Harsin, 2015; 2018) have been removed.

Two things have happened as a result of this loss of traditional gatekeeping. Firstly, the amount of available information has increased massively. This "infloglut" (Andrejevic, 2013) or "infocalypse" (Schick, 2020) will be familiar to anyone who has ever spent any time on social media platforms such as Twitter: there is simply too much there to take in. This means that more than ever before, there is an increased demand for guidance or some ordering principle through which we can make sense of the tidal wave of information that we encounter on a daily basis. I will simply refer to this as a general *demand for truth.* Secondly, the space for articulation has widened significantly now that everyone is theoretically capable of reaching a global audience through the internet. As such, new opportunities for hegemonic articulation could be – and as I argue, have – manifested.

To conclude, I argue that the process of globalization has led to an ever-increasing global discursive convergence, the result of which is a steady stream of dislocatory experiences as well as a widening of the space for articulation. Aside from accelerating this process, the rise of the internet has had a profound impact on the way we communicate and distribute information, leading to a greater demand for truth. In the following two chapters, I will demonstrate how it is this demand for truth that stands at the center of the articulations that make up the post-truth order as a collective empty signifier.

Chapter 5: The Twitter President

On the 17th of June 2015, businessman and media personality Donald J. Trump formally announced his bid to run for President of the United States in the elections of the following year. Despite initially being dismissed as a joke candidate, Trump soon proved himself to be a formidable opponent to more established Republican candidates (Reeve, 2015). After winning the race for the Republican presidential nomination, Trump shocked the world by beating Hilary Clinton to become the 45th President of the United States in 2016. What followed were four turbulent years in office during which, among many other things, nationwide riots broke out, a global pandemic occurred, and political polarization reached record highs (Kight, 2022). Trump himself played a central divisive role in many of these conflicts, which culminated in the Capitol riot on January 6, 2021, which led to Trump being banned from Twitter and being impeached a record second time.

One of Trump's most defining features is his unique style of communication. His informal and off-the-cuff way of speaking with a frequent use of hyperbole is often credited for much of his success as it enabled him to steer public conversation away from his often questionable political platform (Ahmandian et al., 2017). Another one of his unique features was his prolific use of social media, with Twitter in particular taking up an important role in his day-to-day communications. Trump's direct and reactionary tweets strongly reflected the aforementioned communication style, and stood in stark contrast to the often carefully managed and curated social media presences of his opponents. His victory in the 2016 elections and subsequent inauguration as President changed little in this regard as he continued (and even intensified) his use of the medium, leading some to refer to his presidency as the "Twitter Presidency" (e.g. Ott, 2017).

Trump's Twitter records are a unique resource in many ways. Firstly, due to how little his communication style changes between media his tweets can effectively be seen as an extension of that particular style, and as such representative of it. Secondly, because the text covers such a wide array of topics it allows us to go beyond particular issues and triangulate the general dynamics of his rhetoric. Finally, it is important to note the sheer *amount* of material here. In the five-and-a-half year period between his announcement that he was going to run for President in June 2015 to his eventual expulsion from the platform, Trump produced a staggering 33,773 tweets. This comes down to an average of roughly 17 tweets a day. As a result, the text constitutes a comprehensive and consistent representation of our object of research.

In the rest of this chapter I will be conducting a discourse analysis based on a selection of Trump's tweets. Although it is by no means the first of its kind (e.g. Kreis, 2017; Rivers & Ross, 2020), the analysis I present here is different in that its objective is to map out and clarify the way in which Trump constructs antagonisms. I will argue that he does this by articulating the widely-shared demand for truth that is caused by the organic crisis of the internet as a popular demand, which then functions as the cornerstone of all further articulations of equivalence and difference – that is, as an empty signifier.

Analysis: Trump, Truth, and Fake News

As explained in chapter 2, the practice of articulating a popular demand as an empty signifier involves making it representative for a host of other demands bound together in a chain of equivalence. What this means in practice is that the fulfillment of the popular demand become *symbolic* of the fulfillment of *all other* demands – it becomes a so-called *encompassing* demand (Nonhoff, 2019). However, this chain of equivalence does not need to extend to each and every demand in particular. Rather, through previous social practice many demands will have already been brought together under more general, higher-level demands. Such demands are called *subsuming* demands. An example of a signifier related to a subsuming demand could be something like "economic performance", as it covers a multitude of lower-level demands, but its fulfillment would not suffice for *all* of them.

The relations between demands come in three forms. Firstly, all demands share a relation of *difference*. Following chapter 1, this is the basic constitutive condition which allows us to speak of them as separate things in the first place. Secondly, demands sharing a relation of *equivalence* are brought together through their difference from something else. Thirdly, a relation of *contrariety* directly pits demands against each other, as the fulfillment of one is obstructed by the other – thereby constituting antagonism between the two. With these concepts in mind we turn to the results of my analysis.

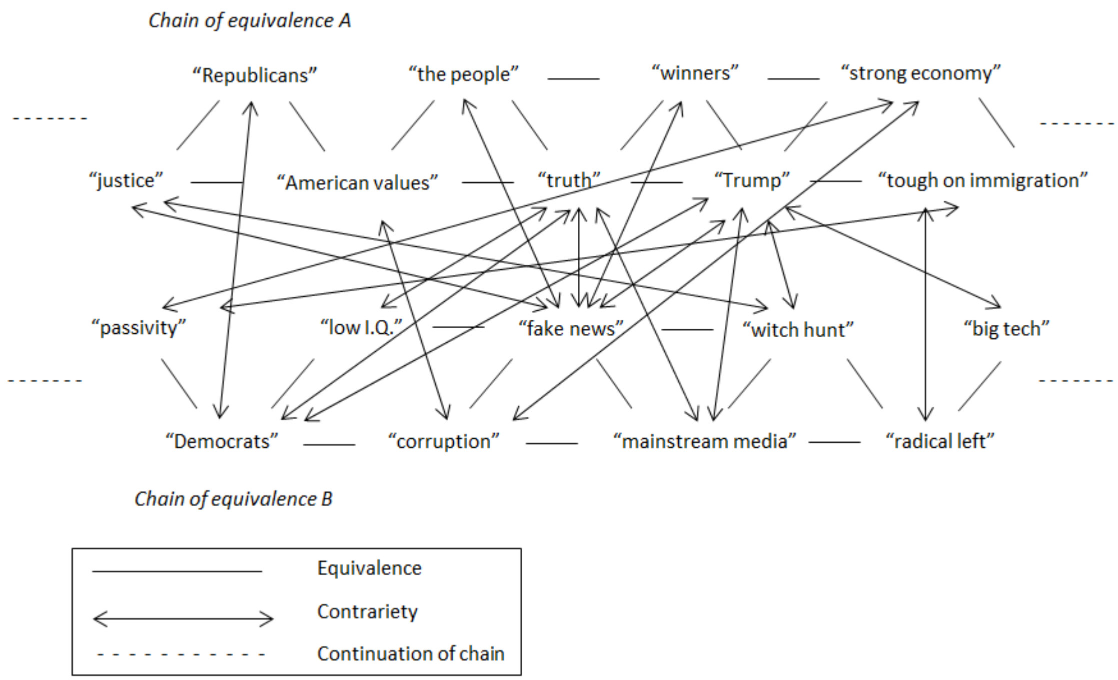

Figure 4.1 Reconstruction of core signifiers and relations of equivalence and contrariety in Donald Trump's tweets based on Nonhoff's visual representation (Nonhoff, 2019, 90).

Figure 4.1 represents the selection of signifiers and relations that my analysis of the text yielded. As we can see, the discursive space is split between two chains of equivalence, with chain A at the top representing Trump's project and chain B at the bottom representing the antagonistic Other. The first step, then, is to identify the central points or empty signifiers of each chain. As I have already mentioned, "truth" is the empty signifier for chain A; for chain B, the empty signifier is "fake news". The latter is somewhat of a Trump trademark, which is evident from the fact that it comes up a staggering 979 times in the text during the designated time period. The relation between these two core signifiers is twofold. On the one hand, Trump makes the contrariety between "fake news" and "truth" explicit in a number of tweets (e.g. A1-2). On the other hand, the contrariety is implicitly present in the term "fake news" itself. As discussed previously, truth is a quality that is bestowed upon pieces of information, and "news" constitutes new information. As such, the question of truth is already there beneath the surface. The word "fake" then immediately provides a negative answer to that question, as it implies that the information was somehow falsified. In short, the demand for "truth" is obstructed by the presence of untruths, or "fake news" – as such, they share an implicit relation of contrariety.

A final interesting implication of the word "fake news" is that it suggests that there is a degree of intent and agency behind it. The falsehood did not come about by accident: someone or something produced it. This is very important because it provides a template for further relations of contrariety between signifiers in chain A and signifiers in chain B, as "X" is trying to keep "truth" about "Y" from "Z" by means of "fake news". Not only does this link "Y" and "Z" together with the truth, it also links "X" together with "fake news" as the antagonistic Other to which the other two variables share a relation of contrariety. A good example of this can be found in A3: "the democrats" and the "fake news media" are hiding the "truth" about the "strong economy" from "us". Firstly, it establishes a relation of equivalence between "them", which consist of "the democrats" and the "fake news media"[2] . Then, it puts them contrary to "us" and "strong economy" with regards to "truth"; "fake news" is here implicit as the tool with which they achieve the obstruction.

With this template we can see the formation of an "us" around "truth", and a "them" around "fake news". As I explained earlier, these are the two empty signifiers that constitute the broader chain of equivalences. The next step, then, is to analyze the chains themselves, starting with chain A, or the "us" in the text. There are two things I would like to emphasize here, starting with the fact that, at its core, the discourse remains populist at heart. Despite the fact that "the people" is not the primary empty signifier around which the chain is articulated, it still plays a vital secondary role as the basis for the "us" from whom "truth" is withheld. It is the first among equivalents, so to speak. The basic argument is that Trump's notion of "us" or "the people" is held together by a common demand for truth. This is evident from his many

[2] Trump uses a number of terms to refer to the news media such as "fake news media" (A3), "mainstream media" (A4), "lamestream media" (A5), or simply "fake news" (A2). As these terms all refer to more or less the same thing, I have decided to use "mainstream media" to represent it. What is very important to note here, however, is the difference between "fake news" in this context, and "fake news" as a piece of information.

denunciations of “fake news” as the “enemy of the people” (e.g. A6-8), and he even directly references the demand for truth in A9. Following the template from the previous paragraph, “the people” serve as the primary locus of “Z” from which all kinds of other equivalences can be derived.

The other thing of note regarding chain A is the role Trump attributes to himself and his administration. By constantly referencing the “witch hunt” against his own person (e.g. A10-12) he establishes a unique relation of contrariety between himself and the antagonistic Other, thereby placing himself squarely *within* the chain of equivalences. In doing so, he distances himself somewhat from other signifiers by establishing that, while he is *equivalent* to them in his opposition to the Other, he is not *equal* to them. The upshot of this is that his own role, his cult of personality, becomes central to the chain itself, which confirms his authorship and solidifies his presence within it. This also allows him to posit a direct relation of equivalence between himself and more abstract, symbolic signifiers such as “justice” (A10) or “the people”.

Next, we move on to the other side, to the “them” of chain B. As I mentioned, the empty signifier that serves as the basis for this chain of equivalence is “fake news”. The antagonistic, black-and-white nature of this chain is exemplified in tweet A13, in which Trump literally describes “fake news” as “the opposition party”. A14 expands on this slightly, adding “the democrats”, “the radical left”, and “mainstream media” to the equation as “partners”. Throughout his political career, the names of these partners have fluctuated: for instance, before his presidency “the swamp” was used as a catch-all variable to denote not just Democrats but also rival Republicans. Similarly, “big tech” only became a target when the likes of Twitter and Facebook started clamping down on disinformation on their platforms. Despite these differences, however, the rhetoric still adheres to the template I described earlier in that the equivalence between the various different signifiers is still rooted in their common use of “fake news” (for examples of this, see A14 regarding rival Republicans and A15 regarding big tech).

Another feature of Trump’s articulation is his frequent use of wordplay to embed negative features. There are numerous examples of this: “lamestream media”, “Do nothing democrats”, “sleepy Joe Biden”, and so forth (e.g. A15). The effects of this are twofold. First of all, by ridiculing the opposition Trump establishes a general veneer of inferiority on the whole chain of equivalence. This feeds into the general “winners” versus “losers” aspect of his discourse. Second, the particular negative features he ascribes to his opponents serve as grounds for relations of contrariety: the suggestion that the opposition does nothing (they are “passive”) puts them in the way of e.g. a “strong economy”.

A final, more general thing to note concerns the way the term “fake news” is contested. In A15, Trump responds to CNN quoting him as having called “the media” the “enemy of the people” by claiming he was only referring to “fake news media”. This suggests a discrepancy between the understandings both sides have of the signifiers “the media” and “fake news” – they are *floating signifiers*. The upshot of this is that, due to the previously discussed implicit relation between “fake news” and “truth”, the signifier “truth” is *also* a floating signifier. It is this ‘floating’ status that epitomizes the organic crisis of the digital age. For a more in-depth analysis of “fake news” as a floating signifier, please refer to Farkas and Schou (2018).

That concludes my analysis of Trump’s Twitter discourse. As I have argued, the central relation of contrariety between “truth” and “fake news” serves as the foundation of two antagonistic chains of equivalence. The equivalences and contrarieties of which these chains consist generally follow the template of “X is trying to keep the truth about Y from Z by means of fake news”. I have attempted to demonstrate this by going through some noteworthy aspects of Trump’s discourse in particular, such as his own role in the discourse and his use of wordplay to discredit his opponents.

Chapter 6: The Russian Mouthpiece

Russia Today (RT) is an international news outlet founded in 2005 by the Russian government to promote their country and its interests abroad. As opposed to conventional diplomatic tools, however, Russia Today has always attempted to downplay and obscure its identity as effectively an extension of state power in order to attract as large an audience as possible. This can be seen in their rebranding from “Russia Today” to the more neutral sounding “RT” in 2009 (Yablokov, 2015). The channel first attracted worldwide attention with its coverage of the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, in which it named Georgia as the aggressor. This pitted the news outlet squarely against its international counterparts, a contrariety that has since become its trademark. According to RT’s editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan, the goal of RT is to provide alternative accounts to counterbalance the “information monopoly” of Western media. She describes RT’s editorial policy as follows:

> Everybody wants to know what is happening in their backyards. (...) We decided that we are going to look for stories that are on the one hand extremely interesting, that can be breathtaking, fascinating for our audience, and on the other hand that have not been reported or hugely underreported in the mainstream media. (Kramer, 2010)

The channel has since become a home for controversial voices from all around the world, with people such as InfoWars’s Alex Jones, WikiLeaks’s Julian Assange and UKIP leader Nigel Farage making appearances (Pomerantsev, 2015). The success of RT has not gone unappreciated by Russian authorities either, as the Kremlin upped the channel’s humble starting budget of $30 million in 2005 to a massive $400 million in 2017 (Elswah & Howard, 2020). This has allowed RT to significantly expand its international reach by establishing sister channels in different languages including Spanish, German, French, and Arabic. However, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought this growth largely to a standstill with governments, social media platforms, and telecom companies alike blocking its services in large parts of the world.

Aside from its news reports, RT publishes a large array of op-eds and opinion pieces that cover a range of social, political and cultural issues. These pieces are commonly written by a variety of authors that are not necessarily employed by RT itself. This is reflected in a disclaimer found at the bottom of every article which says that "the statements, views and opinions expressed in this column are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of RT". The word "necessarily" does a lot of heavy lifting here, as there articles all show definitive political leanings that skew heavily if not completely to one side. After all, RT remains an asset of the Russian state as an unofficial mouthpiece: its objective is to spread state-approved narratives. This means that articles that find their way onto RT's website must either reflect those narratives or at the very least not contradict them. As such, I believe an analysis of RT's op-eds can provide valuable insights into the way Russian discourse is articulated on an international level.

In the following part of this chapter I will provide such an analysis. This will be similar in form to the one presented in the previous chapter. This means that I will again present my results through a visual representation of the various relations of contrariety and equivalence in the style of Nonhoff (2019). This will be followed up by a discussion of the most important and interesting aspects of the discourse, as well as how it relates to the underlying organic crisis of the internet described in chapter 4.

Analysis: Russia versus the World

Once again we find the demand for truth at the center of the articulation. This time, however, the relation of contrariety is twofold. On the one hand, there is the standard opposition between "truth" and "untruth". This is apparent in the usage of terms such as "fake news" (Marsden, 2022b) or "hoax" (Bartlett, 2022, Furedi, 2022) which, as I discussed in the previous chapter, carry an implicit relation of contrariety to "truth". On the other hand is the opposition between "full" truth and "partial" truth. Many RT articles (e.g. Maavak, 2022; Bridge, 2022) emphasize that the truth is more complex than "they" (meaning the antagonistic Other) let on. The upshot of this is that, while not explicitly denying the truth of other narratives, the notion of “truth” is expanded to include other interpretations that might not be congruent with each other. This means that the antagonism is moved from the piece of information itself to the level of the *distribution* of information: as such, the true relation of contrariety is not between “truth” and “untruth” but between “free speech” and “censorship”.

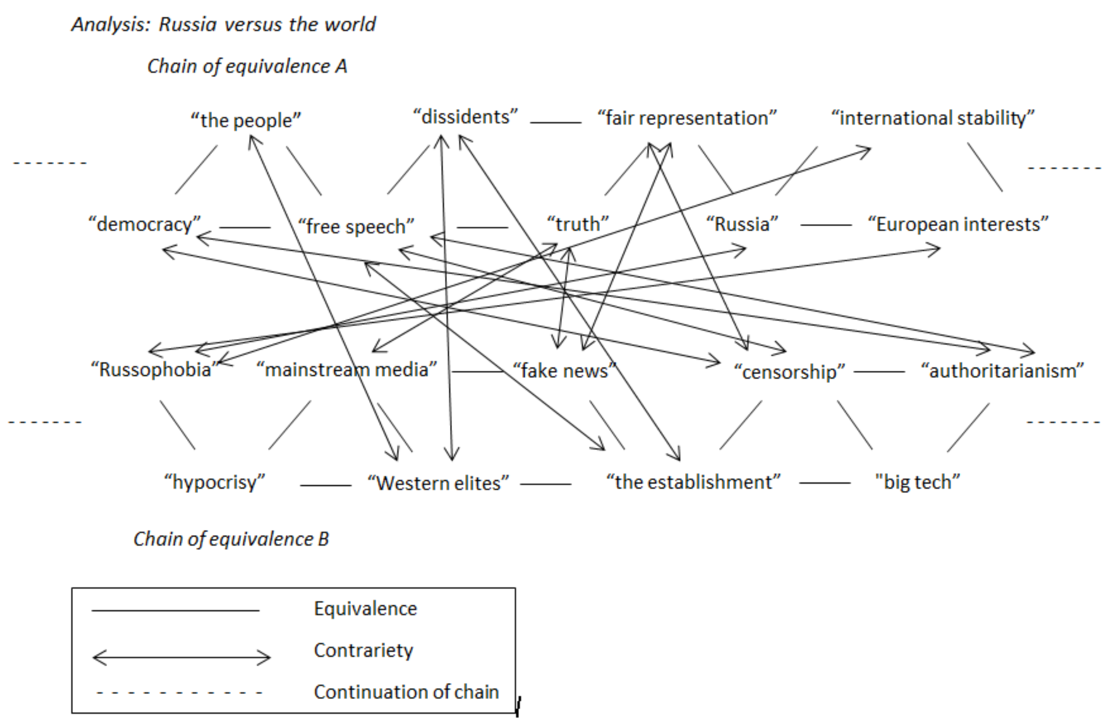

Figure 5.1 Reconstruction of core signifiers and relations of equivalence and contrariety in RT’s op-eds based on Nonhoff’s visual representation (Nonhoff, 2019, 90).

As such, we have two sets of two signifiers that together form the core of their respective chains of equivalences: “truth” and “free speech” on one side, and “fake news” and “censorship” on the other. The question, then, becomes which of these signifiers are the empty signifiers that form the focal point of their respective chains of equivalence. In the case of chain A, “truth” can still be seen as the empty signifier as “free speech” is merely posed as an accessory to the pursuit and eventual fulfillment of the demand for truth – a necessary, but not a sufficient condition. In the case of chain B, however, the relation between the two signifiers is less clear since the “untruth” is not the only defining factor. This means that the equivalence between the two signifiers has to be mediated by another empty signifier that is representative of both. Various terms are used to describe this source, but one that comes up most often is "the establishment" (e.g. Marsden, 2022c; Cheong, 2022d; Cheong, 2022c; Lilly, 2021).

What we are left with, then, are two empty signifiers that serve as the loci of their respective chains of equivalence: "truth" for chain A, and "the establishment" for chain B. The next objective is to delve into the equivalences that make up both chains, starting with chain A. First of all, there is a clear traditional populist division between "the people" and "the elite". This is apparent in articles such as Marsden (2022a), which accuses "Western elites" of intentionally lowering the living standards of "average people". However, whereas the notion of "the Western elite" stays relatively stable across different articles, the idea of what "the people" signifies fluctuates a lot more. In some cases, the signifier is used to refer to all Western peoples as one homogenous mass, whereas in others the distinction between the American people versus the European people is more salient. For instance, Nuttall (2022) exhibits a more universal notion of the people, whereas Marsden (2022a) isolates the European people from the American people and even pits them against each other. While this could be attributed to the fact that there are various different authors, it is also indicative of the incompleteness of the movement towards global discourse mentioned in chapter 4. On a global discursive level, RT applies "the people" in a unified sense to posit an antagonism to "the Western elite"; but on a more localized level, they emphasize the difference between the Americans and the Europeans to problematize the unity of the "West".

This leads nicely into the second point of interest, namely the position of Russia within the chain of equivalence. The aforementioned attempt to fracture the notion of "the West" serves to weaken the antagonism with "the East" – with Russia. This is reflected in numerous articles that emphasize the importance of geostrategic and economic cooperation between Russia and Europe in particular (e.g. the "EU-Ukraine-Russia axis" mentioned in Marsden (2022b)). Other articles emphasize the importance of Russia to maintaining the stability of the international system (e.g. Bridge, 2022b). The point of these narratives seems to be to establish relations of equivalence between "Russia" on the one hand, and "European interests" and "international stability" on the other. The other side of Russia's position is defined by its relations of contrariety – by the things it is placed in opposition to. These relations paint the picture of a misunderstood Russia beset on all sides by enemies. With fake news slander and suppression of “fair and truthful” reporting, the “Russophobe” Western establishment would attack the reputation and good name of Russia in order to discredit and oppress it (e.g. Marsden, 2022b; Bridge, 2022c; De Zayas, 2022).

A final thing to note about chain A is the frequency with which conventional Western values are called upon. In the previous paragraphs I mentioned “free speech”, which is often extended to include “democracy”. The upshot of this is that the other side is *not* in line with these values, which is reflected in the accusations of “censorship” and “authoritarianism” (Marsden, 2022b; Cheong, 2022a). Aside from playing into existing Western sensibilities regarding such terms (exemplified by Cheong, 2022b, which calls the Biden administration “Orwellian”), this rhetoric constitutes an attempt to unify other anti-establishment voices (or “dissidents”) under the banner of legitimacy granted by “common values”. This also hints at the existence of a social logic concerning these terms, which I will briefly discuss further in the conclusion.

Now we turn to chain of equivalence B. As I explained, the core empty signifier that represents this chain is “the establishment”. The term itself is used in multiple articles to refer to a range of social actors, such as American foreign policy makers (Marsden, 2022c), leftist Democrats (Cheong, 2022d), Big Tech companies (Cheong, 2022b), and “woke” academics (Ritter, 2022). The three social groups that stand out most as parts of the establishment are “mainstream media”, “Western elites”, and “Big Tech”. This threefold relationship is often portrayed in a hierarchical manner with the most powerful people in the media and tech industries as exponents of the elite. The industries then serve to facilitate the practices with which the establishment opposes truth: mainstream media produces fake news and “Big Tech” censors the attempts of dissidents to provide alternatives to that fake news through free speech.

One story that exemplifies this narrative concerns Elon Musk’s Twitter takeover (Cheong, 2022a-d). In it, Musk is portrayed as a proponent of freedom, a dissident who is capable of standing up to the establishment as well as Big Tech. It also serves to highlight the way in which the discourse applies Western values, as it pits the “liberal” Musk against the “illiberal” opposition. What is interesting about this is that the antagonistic Other is still characterized as liberal on many other occasions. This seeming inconsistency actually hints at another important aspect of chain B, which is the accusation of “hypocrisy”. Through their opposition to chain A, the “liberal” establishment is betraying its own roots. As such, everything they say and do is hypocritical: they are signaling virtues that they do not actually possess – virtues that are then implicitly attributed to the parts of chain A. This contestation of signifiers for liberal values and to what they should be attributed is a telltale sign of their status as floating signifiers.

In sum, the discourse of RT’s op-eds constructs an antagonistic frontier between chains of equivalence based on the empty signifier “truth” on the one hand and “the establishment” on the other. This antagonism is based on a dual relation of contrariety between “truth” and “fake news” on the one hand (they are lying to us) and “free speech” and “censorship” on the other (they are hiding the whole truth from us). Aside from that, the most prominent features of the discourse lie with the way traditional Western values are appropriated and the way Russia is inserted into the chain of equivalence.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

As I explained in the introduction, the goal of this thesis was to make sense of the phenomenon of the post-truth order. To this end I adopted a poststructuralist perspective, which I used to first contextualize the phenomenon in chapter 4 and subsequently conduct to two case studies in chapters 5 and 6. In this final section I will first assess the results of my case studies and synthesize them into what will become my retroductive explanation of the post-truth order. I will then revisit my research question and provide an answer to it, which marks the conclusion of the substantive part of this thesis. Following that, I will speculate on some further characteristics of the post-truth order, as well as suggest some potential avenues for further research. I will sign off with some final thoughts on the implications of my conclusions.

In chapter 4, I explained that the organic crisis of the internet gave rise to a strong demand for truth to cope with the information chaos it caused. The following two chapters served to demonstrate how this demand for truth is articulated as a popular demand representative of a chain of equivalences – as an empty signifier. In the case of Trump this manifested in a division between "truth" on the one hand and "fake news" on the other. I argued that the reasoning behind Trump's antagonisms follows the template of "X is trying to keep the truth about Y from Z by means of fake news", which connects truth to a range of issues (Y) and social groups (Z) and makes them equivalent with regards to the fake news-spreading antagonistic Other (X). Regardless of specifics, the core argument here is that "they are lying to us". This argument is expanded upon and nuanced in the case of RT and the distinction between "full" and "partial" truth. Instead of outright calling the opposition liars, it is admitted that they might be telling the truth, but even if they are, they are still short of the *full* truth. I argue that this perfectly encapsulates the nature of truth as an empty signifier. Due to the complexity of any given social phenomenon, it is virtually impossible to provide a complete representation. Because of this, the demand for such a truth becomes meaningless in that it represents an unachievable fullness, and can as such be used to represent basically anything as an empty signifier (Laclau, 2005, 71).

My argument is that it is their usage of the same empty signifier of truth that ultimately connects the two cases as exponents of the same hegemonic project. As such, the cases are equivalent in that their chains of equivalence overlap in many if not most regards. However, it is important to note that this does not mean they are *equal*. An articulation is made by a social actor, and as such cannot be fully separated from the context which that actor inhabits. Put simply, every articulation has its own unique quirks and features based on the goals, audiences, and circumstances of the actor uttering it. In the case of Trump, this is demonstrated by emphases on things such as American values and other uniquely American issues such as gun control. This same thing can be seen in the case of RT with the role attributed to Russia in the discourse. The obvious goal here is to incorporate Russia into a chain of equivalences that includes actors such as Trump by using the same rhetoric and targeting the same opponents – by invoking the same *political logic*, if you will. Through this alliance based on aligning interests and opportunism, they form a more or less united front against the antagonistic Other as a discourse coalition. It is this particular discourse coalition that I argue forms the heart of the hegemonic project that is the post-truth order.

In short, I argue that the two cases that I have analyzed in this thesis are similar in that they both use the demand for truth as an empty signifier. Although the equivalences and differences that are presented in their respective articulations differ somewhat, they are part of the same discourse coalition in that they both base their differences and equivalences on a Manichean division between those on the side of truth and those who oppose it. I now return to my research question of "*How can we understand the post-truth order as a single, unified phenomenon or object of research?"* My answer is as follows: the post-truth order consists of a discourse coalition between various actors from across the world who base their articulations of equivalence and difference on the empty signifier of truth.

Characterizing the Post-Truth Order

That concludes my analysis of the post-truth order and its political logic. As I discussed in chapter 3, I will now briefly touch upon the social and fantasmatic logics associated with it. The following suggestions should not be interpreted as conclusions but rather as indications of themes that might, after further investigation, turn out to be general features of the discourse. Firstly, the frequent attribution of liberal values such as “democracy” and “free speech” to the upper chains of equivalence indicates that both sides hold them in high regard, even if they disagree on what they entail. This suggests that values such as these are universally recognized as positive and that publicly presenting oneself as contrary to them would be unwise. In a sense, at least paying lip service to these values becomes a necessary requirement for participation – which indicates that they may function as a basic *rule* of the discourse, as a social logic.

Secondly, the nature of the central argument behind the post-truth order – that they are withholding the truth from us – has an inherently conspiratorial ring to it. The implication is that the antagonistic Other somehow has not only the power to withhold the truth from us, but also the *will* to do so and to keep doing so. As such, their relation of contrariety is not the result of random chance, but of an intentional effort to oppose and subvert. This posits the Other not as a mere obstacle but as a true antagonist – as an enemy. My suggestion here is that this constitutes the fantasmatic logic of the post-truth order, as it engages people with the articulation by making them feel threatened instead of merely inconvenienced.

As discussed, these are just suggestions that require further research before they can be posited as proper conclusions. To this end, I will provide some suggestions for cases as further avenues of research. A natural next step would be to conduct a similar analysis of RT’s services in different languages: do they follow the same principles? If not, where do they diverge? This could then be supplemented with an analysis of prominent actors in that linguistic context: for instance, RT Germany’s service could be compared with the rhetoric of anti-establishment parties such as Die Linke and Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). It would also be interesting to look at the reactions of establishment actors to the post-truth order: what are their tactics? Do they differ from the ones seen on the other side? Such additions would serve to flesh out the discursive space as a whole as opposed to just the post-truth side. Finally, one could turn away from the more established state-based actors and towards the way the discourse is conducted in the digital realm on forums such as 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit.

Final Thoughts

When I started writing this thesis, I set out to understand the phenomenon of disinformation. However, as my research progressed, I kept running into different phenomena that were all somehow related to it – populism, illiberalism, fake news, the list goes on. As such, I started to wonder if all of these things could somehow be understood as part of a *single* phenomenon – which led me to my current object of research, the post-truth order. Since a comprehensive analysis of such an encompassing phenomenon would not be feasible for a thesis of this length, I decided to focus on simply theorizing the existence of such a phenomenon and provide a conceptual framework with which it could be analyzed.

Which brings me to my conclusion: namely, that the post-truth order should be seen in poststructuralist terms, as a hegemonic project built on the empty notion of truth. Once again, this is intended as a provisional conclusion, as a retroductive explanation meant to inform the way we understand past and current events. The question is, of course, whether or not my justification of this explanation is acceptable. If so, it should inform not just the way we look at the articulations of the post-truth order, but also how we look at the other side. Hegemonic challenges occur in times of great change or upheaval when a status quo is shattered by a torrent of dislocations. Rising up to such a challengeSt not only involves piecing back together what is left of the old, but also requires the incorporation of the new. Attempts to restore the status quo by negating the conditions of dislocation – for example, with the reintroduction of gatekeeping mechanisms – are futile. As Laclau puts it:

> The defence of the community against an external threat has dislocated that community, which, in order to persist, cannot simply repeat something that preceded the dislocatory moment. That is why someone who wants to defend an existing order of things has already lost it through its very defence. (Laclau, 2005, 121)

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Appendix: Trump Tweets

This appendix consists of a selection of tweets retrieved from Donald Trump's Twitter. Because his account is still banned as of now, the source of this retrieval is the Trump Twitter Archive, which can be found at https://www.thetrumparchive.com/. I refer to this appendix in the text as A(*n*).

1. Why was the FBI giving so much information to the Fake News Media. They are not supposed to be doing that, and knowing the enemy of the people Fake News, they put their own spin on it - truth doesn't matter to them!

Jun 17th 2018 - 8:25:53 PM EST

2. These Russian individuals did their work during the Obama years. Why didn't Obama do something about it? Because he thought Crooked Hillary Clinton would win, that's why. Had nothing to do with the Trump Administration, but Fake News doesn't want to report the truth, as usual!

Jul 14th 2018 - 2:17:37 PM EST

3. The Democrats new and pathetically untrue sound bite is that we are in a "Constitutional Crisis." They and their partner, the Fake News Media, are all told to say this as loud and as often as possible. They are a sad JOKE! We may have the strongest Economy in our history, best...

May 12th 2019 - 5:35:41 PM EST

4. A very big part of the Anger we see today in our society is caused by the purposely false and inaccurate reporting of the Mainstream Media that I refer to as Fake News. It has gotten so bad and hateful that it is beyond description. Mainstream Media must clean up its act, FAST!

Oct 25th 2018 - 7:18:18 AM EST

5. SO MUCH FAKE NEWS! The Lamestream Media has gone absolutely insane because they realize we are winning BIG in all of the polls that matter. They write or show one false story after another. They are truly sick people. VOTE!!!

Oct 12th 2020 - 9:02:10 AM EST

6. Much more “disinformation” coming out of CNN, MSDNC, @nytimes and @washingtonpost, by far, than coming out of any foreign country, even combined. Fake News is the Enemy of the People!

May 30th 2020 - 2:33:36 PM EST

7. I just cannot state strongly enough how totally dishonest much of the Media is. Truth doesn’t matter to them, they only have their hatred &amp, agenda. This includes fake books, which come out about me all the time, always anonymous sources, and are pure fiction. Enemy of the People!

Aug 30th 2018 - 7:11:58 AM EST

8. The Fake News hates me saying that they are the Enemy of the People only because they know it’s TRUE. I am providing a great service by explaining this to the American People. They purposely cause great division &amp, distrust. They can also cause War! They are very dangerous &amp, sick!

Aug 5th 2018 - 7:38:12 AM EST

9. “Ax falls quickly at BuzzFeed and Huffpost!” Headline, New York Post. Fake News and bad journalism have caused a big downturn. Sadly, many others will follow. The people want the Truth!

Jan 26th 2019 - 4:37:07 PM EST

10. The Mueller Angry Democrats recently deleted approximately 19,000 Text messages between FBI Agent Lisa Page and her lover, Agent Peter S. These Texts were asked for and INVALUABLE to the truth of the Witch Hunt Hoax. This is a total Obstruction of Justice. All Texts Demanded!

Dec 29th 2018 - 10:42:50 AM EST

11. Too bad a large portion of the Media refuses to report the lies and corruption having to do with the Rigged Witch Hunt - but that is why we call them FAKE NEWS!

Aug 5th 2018 - 8:49:21 AM EST

12. There was No Collusion with Russia (except by the Democrats). When will this very expensive Witch Hunt Hoax ever end? So bad for our Country. Is the Special Councel/Justice Department leaking my lawyers letters to the Fake News Media? Should be looking at Dems corruption instead?

Jun 2nd 2018 - 1:31:02 AM EST

13. THE FAKE NEWS MEDIA IS THE OPPOSITION PARTY. It is very bad for our Great Country....BUT WE ARE WINNING!

Aug 16th 2018 - 8:50:44 AM EST

14. Millions of $'s of false ads, paid for by lobbyists-special interests of cheater @SenTedCruz and sleepy @JebBush, are now running in S.C.

Feb 12th 2016 - 4:54:11 PM EST

15. CNN and others in the Fake News Business keep purposely and inaccurately reporting that I said the “Media is the Enemy of the People.” Wrong! I said that the “Fake News (Media) is the Enemy of the People,” a very big difference. When you give out false information - not good!

Oct 29th 2018 - 8:00:23 PM EST