Introducing Relational Political Analysis

Political Semiotics as a Theory and Method

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Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology

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In various disciplines such as archeology, psychology, psychoanalysis, international relations, and philosophy, we have seen the emergence of relational approaches or theories. This series, founded by François Dépelteau, seeks to further develop relational sociology through the publication of diverse theoretical and empirical research—including that which is critical of the relational approach. In this respect, the goal of the series is to explore the advantages and limits of relational sociology. The series welcomes contributions related to various thinkers, theories, and methods clearly associated with relational sociology (such as Bourdieu, critical realism, Deleuze, Dewey, Elias, Latour, Luhmann, Mead, network analysis, symbolic interactionism, Tarde, and Tilly). Multidisciplinary studies which are relevant to relational sociology are also welcome, as well as research on various empirical topics (such as education, family, music, health, social inequalities, international relations, feminism, ethnicity, environmental issues, politics, culture, violence, social movements, and terrorism). Relational sociology—and more specifically, this series—will contribute to change and support contemporary sociology by discussing fundamental principles and issues within a relational framework.

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Introducing Relational Political Analysis

Political Semiotics as a Theory and Method
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It has been a long journey since the authors of this book proposed for the first time what they called “political semiotics” in a small international conference “Naming in Text, Naming in Culture” held at the University of Tartu, Estonia, in December, 2007. The title of their presentation was “Towards a semiotic theory of hegemony: Naming as hegemonic operation in Lotman and Laclau.” The paper argued that there are fundamental congenialities between the Tartu-Moscow School of cultural semiotics (led by Juri Lotman) and the Essex School of discourse theory (led by Ernesto Laclau) and that it needs to be recognized by both intellectual communities in order for developing a subfield of both semiotics and political science. Luckily or unluckily, these two cocky doctoral students from 2007 have not grown up and still believe in this link. After having defended their doctoral theses (Ventsel in semiotics in 2009, Selg in government and politics in 2011) on teasing out this link in more detail, they came across an emerging community of researchers who called themselves “relational sociologists.” This was in many ways the turning point that made the current book possible. It turned out that we had been “relational” all along but never felt the need to emphasize this aspect of our thinking: After all, the core concepts of semiotics and discourse theory make no sense whatsoever from a non-relational perspective. Reading and later meeting in person fellow “relationalists” throughout the world made us realize that this aspect needed to be brought to the fore if “political
semiotics” wanted to be heard outside the inner circle of open-minded semioticians who are interested in politics.

The resulting book is in many ways a team effort, but only two members of the team have their names on the cover as authors. Thanking all the people who over the years have contributed to the innumerable discussions of political semiotics and relational sociology would be an impossible endeavor. Therefore, we mention only the “special thanks” here.

Our special thanks go to Risto Heiskala (University of Tampere) and Benjamin Klasche (Tallinn University) who read carefully and made valuable comments on earlier drafts of the current manuscript; to Andreas Ventsel’s wife Mari-Liis Madisson (University of Tartu) and Peeter Selg’s partner Maria Koldekivi for their long-lasting support. Last but not least, we thank the late François Dépelteau for making it all possible in this volume (and numerous others) on relational sociology. The breadth and depth of his work in setting the relational sociology movement truly aflame on a global scale are still partly to be discovered, but its fruits will never be forgotten.

Our work on political semiotics and relational thinking has throughout the years been supported by various research grants and fellowships including:

- PUT1485 “A Relational Approach to Governing Wicked Problems” (Estonian Research Council);
- PRG314 “Semiotic fitting as a mechanism of biocultural diversity: instability and sustainability in novel environments” (Estonian Research Council);
- SHVFI19127 “Strategic Narrative as a Model for Reshaping the Security Dilemma” (Estonian Defence Forces);
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- “Governing Wicked Problems: A Relational Approach” (postdoctoral research fellowship at the Turku Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Turku, Finland).
“In this meticulous relational account of political semiosis, Selg and Ventsel offer an original account of the constitutive power of communication that goes beyond the Essex school of discourse analysis and the Tartu-Moscow school of cultural semiotics. They analyze the articulation of hegemony in power, governance, and democratic regimes as mediated through public communication. They also provide a provocative explanation of threats to digital identity cards in Estonia. This challenging book merits close attention.”

—Bob Jessop, *Distinguished Professor of Sociology, Lancaster University, UK*

“Peeter Selg and Andreas Ventsel’s new book is a terrific addition to the growing field of interpretive political science. Their political semiotics emphasises the role of meanings and communication in politics while rightly emphasizing their relational nature. They also include a useful guide to some of the concrete methods by which researchers can explore such meanings. This is an important contribution to the field.”

—Mark Bevir, *Professor of Political Science and Director of the Center for British Studies, University of California, Berkeley, USA*

“Peeter Selg and Andreas Ventsel have written a truly marvelous, entertaining and humorous, yet analytically clear introduction to relational political analysis. Opposing relationalism to positivist substantialism,
which considers elements as primary and relations secondary, the authors point out that political semiotics treats relations between social entities as constitutive of those very entities. Hitting the nail right on the head, Selg and Ventsel maintain that a hammer would not be a hammer without a nail. I recommend this book for anyone wanting to conduct better social and political research.”

—Pertti Alasuutari, Academy Professor of Sociology, Tampere University, Finland
# Contents

1 Introduction: Political Semiotics as a Theory, Methodology, and Method of Relational Political Analysis  
References

2 The “Relational Turn” in the Social Sciences  
2.1 To Relate Is to Constitute, Not Just Cause  
   2.1.1 There’s No Hammer Without a Nail!  
      On the Constitution of “Things”  
   2.1.2 Nailing the Hammer: On the Constitution of Constitution and Cause  
2.2 Substantialism and Relationalism  
   2.2.1 Self-Action: Did the Wind Start to Blow or the Blow Start the Wind?  
   2.2.2 Inter-Action: Blows Gone with the Wind  
   2.2.3 Trans-Action: Wind and Blowing “Considered Separately, but Not as Being Separate”  
   2.2.4 Relationalism and Substantialism Compared: Three Concepts of Process  
References

3 Relational Approach to the Political: Power, Governance, and Democracy  
3.1 Substantialism and Relationalism in Power Analysis
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1.1</td>
<td>Self-Actionalism: Power as a Property or Resource of the Powerful</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1.2</td>
<td>Inter-Actionalism: Power as a Relation Between Actors</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1.3</td>
<td>The Causalism of Self-Actionalism and Inter-Actionalism</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1.4</td>
<td>Trans-Actionalism: Mutual Constitution of Power and Subjects</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Substantialism and Relationalism in the Study of Governance</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.1</td>
<td>Types of Problems of Governance: Simple, Complex, Wicked, and De-Problematised</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.2</td>
<td>Self-Active Governance: Governing Through Markets or Hierarchies</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.3</td>
<td>Inter-Active Governance: Governing Through Networks</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.4</td>
<td>From the Failure of Substantialism to the Opportunities of Relational Approaches</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.5</td>
<td>From Substantialist Governance Failure to Relational Approach to Governance</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.6</td>
<td>Bob Jessop’s Relational Approach to Governance</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.7</td>
<td>Governance as De-Problematising (Wicked) Problems</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.8</td>
<td>Governance as Discourse, Culture, and Argumentation</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Substantialism and Relationalism in the Study of Democracy</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.1</td>
<td>Self-Actionalism and the Study of Democracy</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.2</td>
<td>Inter-Actionalism and the Study of Democracy</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.3</td>
<td>Trans-Actionalism and the Study of Democracy</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Hegemony in the Intersection of Power, Governance, and Democracy in the Essex School of Political Analysis</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Taking Stock: What Is Political in Relational Political Analysis?</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td></td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Three Concepts of Semiotics</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>A Semiotic Approach to the Political?</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2 Structuralist Self-Actionalism in Semiotics
116
4.3 Inter-actionalism in Semiotics: Post-structuralism,
Inter-textuality, and Dialogism
123
4.4 Trans-actionalism: Cultural Semiotics
127
References
131

5 A Framework of Political Semiotics: Political Logic of the Semiosphere
137
5.1 Bringing Discourse Theory and Cultural Semiotics into a Dialogue
140
5.1.1 The Ontological Statutes of Discourse and Semiosphere
141
5.1.2 Exclusion as Constitutive Condition for Meaning-Making
143
5.1.3 The Notion of Translation in Cultural Semiotics
145
5.1.4 Bilingualism in Lotman and Laclau
147
5.1.5 Overcoming Bilingualism: “Empty Signifiers” and “Rhetoric Translation”
149
5.1.6 Naming as a Hegemonic Operation in Laclau and Lotman
151
5.1.7 The Forces “Behind” Naming
153
5.2 From Congenialities to Fruitful Complements: Expanding the Dialogue
156
5.2.1 Naming Is but One Hegemonic Strategy
156
5.2.2 Lotman’s Notion of “Text” as a Potential Basis for a Typology of Hegemony
159
5.3 Cultural Semiotics and the Study of Communication
160
5.3.1 Taking Stock from Neo-Structuralism: Saussurean Semiology as Trans-Actionalist Communication Theory
161
5.3.2 Cultural Semiotics as a Trans-Actional Study of Communication
166
References
169

6 Political Semiotics and the Study of the Political: Power,
Governance, and Democracy
173
6.1 Semiotic Categories for Explaining the Political
177
6.1.1 Authoritarian Populism in Power, Governance, and Democracy (Phatic Public Communication) 179
6.1.2 Democratic Populism in Power, Governance, and Democracy (Poetic Public Communication) 186
6.1.3 Clientelism in Power, Governance, and Democracy (Conative Public Communication) 188
6.1.4 Deliberative Power, Governance, and Democracy (Referential Public Communication) 191
6.1.5 Radical/Agonistic Democracy, Power and Governance (Metafunctional Public Communication) 196
6.1.6 Totalitarian Populism in Power, Governance, and Democracy (Emotive Public Communication) 201

6.2 General Comments on the Categories of Political Semiotics 206
   6.2.1 The Categories Are Ideal Types 206
   6.2.2 The Problem of Metonymy and Metaphor and Their Relation to Language Functions 207

6.3 Conclusion 209
References 210

7 Political Semiotics as a Constitutive Explanation and Abductive Research Logic 215
   7.1 Constitutive Explanation and Causal Explanation 215
      7.1.1 Causal Explanation—The “Art of Separation” 216
      7.1.2 Constitutive Explanation—The Art of Considering “Separately, but Not as Being Separate” 219
      7.1.3 Relational Approach to Research Design: Constitutive and Causal Research Questions 224
   7.2 Why Constitutive Explanation Entails Abductive Research Logic? 228
      7.2.1 Deductive, Inductive, and Abductive Reasoning 228
      7.2.2 Why Is Constitutive Explanation Inherently Abductive? 234
   7.3 Constructing “a Matter of Course”: Why Semiotics Is a Constitutive Explanation? 238
References 242
8 From Methodology to Methods and Applications: 
Introducing Political Form Analysis 247
  8.1 Why Political Form Analysis? 248
  8.2 Micro-Level Political Form Analysis: The Constitution 
of the Estonian “Bronze-Speak” 250
  8.3 Macro-Level Political Form Analysis: European Migrant 
Crisis and the Constitution of Wickedness 256
  8.4 Implications of Political Form Analysis 266
References 271

9 Application of Relational Political Analysis: Political 
Semiotic Explanation of the Constitution of Digital 
Threats 277
  9.1 Introduction 277
  9.2 The Constitution of e-Threats in the Representation 
of the Media Coverage of Estonian Identity Card 
Vulnerability 280
    9.2.1 Chronology of the Case 280
    9.2.2 Mapping Referent Objects: National Security, 
    Private Sector, and e-Estonia’s Reputation 280
    9.2.3 Active and Passive Social Actors 285
    9.2.4 Articulation of the Urgency of Threats 290
    9.2.5 Ways of Managing Threats 294
  9.3 The Semiotic Logic of the Constitution of the Scenarios 
of Security Risks 297
  9.4 Reputation Damage as a Hegemonic “Empty Signifier” 
in the Discourse of ID-Security Risks 300
  9.5 Conclusion: The Constitution of e-Threats 
as Problems of Power, Governance, 
and Democracy 303
References 306

Conclusion: The Subject and Agenda for Relational Political 
Analysis 309

Index 315
List of Figures

Fig. 7.1 Abductive presentation of the semiotic categories for constitutive explanation of the political. *Note* metaphor or non-discrete pole is also the de-problematization and de-democratization pole; metonymic or discrete pole is also the problematization and democratization pole 242

Fig. 8.1 The European Migrant Crisis as a wicked problem *(Source The authors)* 266
## List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.1</td>
<td>Summary of self-actional, inter-actional and trans-actional perspectives</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.1</td>
<td>The criteria for distinguishing different categories of problems</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.1</td>
<td>Deductive presentation of the semiotic categories for explaining the political</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction: Political Semiotics as a Theory, Methodology, and Method of Relational Political Analysis

This book is about introducing the potential of relational thinking for political analysis. Instead of providing a comprehensive overview of possible trajectories for articulating a relational political analysis, we take a different tack in the chapters that follow. Essentially, we put forth a concrete relational theory of the political, which has concrete implications for methodology and conducting research, which culminate in a concrete method we call political form analysis. In addition to this, we sketch out several applications of this theory, methodology, and method. We call our approach “political semiotics” and argue that it is a fruitful way of conducting research on power, governance, and democracy—the core dimensions of the political—in a manner that is envisioned in numerous discussions of the “relational turn” in the social sciences (see Chapter 2). This way we attempt to introduce a possible route of taking steps toward “relational turn” in political science, public administration, and governance studies. But why political semiotics?

Semiotics originates from the works of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) in the European continent and from those of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) in America. It has been one of the earliest disciplines in the human sciences that have explicitly defined its approach in relational terms. It revolves around the notion of “sign.” Both Saussurean and Peircian concepts of sign presume it to be a relation rather than an entity: signs are presumed to be intelligible always as a part of a system.
of relations with other signs. In addition, unlike in the stereotyped depictions of semiotics as a form of structuralism (see Chapter 4), this system of relations is a phenomenon that is a dynamic unfolding process whose constituent elements cannot be grasped separately from the flows within which they are embedded and vice versa. This is exactly what the tradition of “relational sociology” has been proposing as a general view on social reality in both its classical and more recent formulations (see Chapter 2). It is therefore quite remarkable that virtually no-one has brought the semiotic tradition to bear on the program of relational sociology. But why political semiotics?

Thus far semiotic approaches have contributed to analyses of relations between language, power and ideology, Marxism and the systems of signification, and to the problematics of political communication, manipulation and legitimation (see Chapter 4). Nevertheless, political semiotics, as a coherent approach, has not been articulated thus far. “That semiotics—most especially the structuralist semiotics which has dominated the modern period—is political seems, to its detractors, to be a fatuously counterintuitive claim,” writes Charles Lemert (1993, p. 31), an American sociologist discussing already in the 1970s the potential of Saussurean notion of meaning for sociology—including the positivist measurement-oriented version of it (see Lemert 1979). “Yet it is a claim with more than sufficient plausibility” (1993, p. 31) Lemert adds. The current book aims to move toward one possible argument for this “plausibility,” although the route taken has only very general affinities with that of Lemert.1

Our approach is based on cultural semiotics. Cultural semiotics is one of the approaches in the humanities and the social sciences that is “relational all the way down” to use Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998, p. 974) expression. We set the agenda for explicating the meaning-making and formation of power relations through the concept of translation as it is developed by the tradition of cultural semiotics (see also Chapters 4 and 5) and position the latter within the context of other approaches to the social and political reality that have Saussurean background (most notably post-structuralism). *Semiotics* in this view should be considered first and foremost a study of contingent articulation of *meaning in communication*. When we talk about “political semiotics,” then the problematic this label tries to capture is, put very roughly, the constitution of power, governance and, democracy within and through communication. Our book is the only monograph that brings relational conceptions of power and politics to political sociology, political science, and studies of
public administration and governance. The “relational turn” in political science and the other aforementioned disciplines has been the primary concern of the most recent publications of one of us (see Selg 2016a, b; 2018). At the same time we cannot ignore the fact that the potential of semiotic approaches to the social or the political has been somewhat neglected in most treatments of this “turn,” even though discussion of both Saussurean and Peircean semiotics as sources of relational thinking is present in Mustafa Emirbayer’s “Manifesto for a relational sociology” (1997, pp. 300–301), the most highly cited meta-theoretical paper on the topic. Outlining this connection is therefore needed for both intellectual communities of semiotics and relational social sciences.

We aim to clearly demonstrate that Saussurean or post-Saussurean semiotics, especially as it has been developed by the Tartu-Moscow School of cultural semiotics is a “deep” relational or trans-actional approach (cf. Dépelteau 2013, 2018; Selg 2016b, 2018) to social reality. We also take stock of the insights from interdisciplinary intellectual movements such as discourse analysis and interpretive political science that in one way or another have either mentioned semiotic approaches or even referred to their approaches as “semiotic.” This way, we intend to build up a relational framework for political analysis that is coherent in both its ontological premises as well as theoretical and methodological prescriptions. But in addition to that, we intend to take our discussion further to concrete methods and examples of analyses. After having demonstrated the deep relational character of our political semiotic analysis at the theoretical and methodological level, we provide some examples of empirical analysis of various phenomena of power, politics, and governance. This way, our book could also be used as a textbook of relational political analysis and political semiotics by both students of the social sciences and the humanities.

We start Chapter 2 with an argument that informs the entire book: that the major difference between relational and non-relational approaches is not in their emphasis on the importance of social relations in their analyses, but the fundamentally different understanding of those relations. We argue that relational approaches view relations as constitutive and therefore the entities and their relations cannot be considered as being separate from one another. A non-relational approach presumes the primacy and givenness of entities that might or might not enter relations with other such entities. Relations between them are not constitutive of the entities, but something that “happen” between or among them. In most cases, the
relations in that sense are presumed to be causal, which entails considering relations and entities as being separate from one another. We then move on to “test” this simple distinction between relational and non-relational approaches by the discussions between “substantialism” and “relationalism” as they are found in various meta-theoretical reflections of relational sociology. Emirbayer and various other authors have already made a point that there are several “substantialist” approaches in the social sciences: self-actional approaches characteristic of various individualist perspectives (e.g., rational choice, exchange theory) and structuralisms (e.g., structural Marxism, functionalism), and inter-actional approaches that by and large presume the social world to be grasped in terms of variables (the bulk of sociological approaches) or nodes and ties (social network analysis [SNA]). Thus, there are at least three meanings that can be associated with substantialism: structuralism, individualism, and variable-centered analysis.

Relationalism that Emirbayer equates with trans-actional approaches are mostly found in the Continental European social sciences and philosophy (schools revolving around towering figures like Elias, Bourdieu, Foucault, and Latour) and are currently taken further in various forms of “deep” or “radical” relationalism (most recently in the works by Dépelteau and Powell). We conclude the chapter by comparing the substantialist and relational understandings of social processes and argue that although self-actionalism and inter-actionalism can be process-oriented, they mostly are engaged in reducing processes to either their instigators or reifying them as (measurable) entities. Trans-actional approach views processes as processes and tries to avoid process-reduction as far as possible.

In Chapter 3, we highlight that all the three major phenomena of interest for political analysis—power, governance, and democracy—can be conceptualized in terms of meaning-making and cultural and communicative processes that are relational all the way down. First, we focus on power. We distinguish (1) self-actional approaches to power that have their roots in Hobbes’s understanding of power as akin to resource; (2) inter-actional approaches to power that have roots in Max Weber’s understanding of power as a chance of making oneself count in view of resistance; (3) trans-actional approaches of power that have their roots in Foucault’s insistence on strictly relational character of power relations which means that they are constitutive of subjects, not something “owned” by them or “between” them.
We then move on to the notion of governance and see the latter as none other than an exercise of power to address problems. This leaves us with the issue of power—which we already discussed; the issue of problems and the issue of addressing. It is important to first distinguish between various forms or problems of governance, which we characterize as simple, complex, wicked, and the so-called de-problematized problems. Unlike wicked problems, simple and complex problems have one thing in common: the parties affected by them agree on what the problem at hand is. In case of simple problems (e.g., technical problems related to policy implementation), there is also an agreement on the solution to the problem. In case of complex problems (e.g., low PISA test scores), involving very different stakeholders, the disagreement about the solution is sometimes quite extensive. When it comes to wicked problems (e.g., fighting terrorism, addressing global warming, assuring sustainability), the stakeholders have no agreement whatsoever on what the problem at hand is, let alone on possible solutions to it. All that the parties agree on is that the problem needs to be solved. However, wicked problems are essentially unsolvable: they can be governed, tackled, or mitigated, but not solved in the sense of getting rid of the problem. We then distinguish between various forms of addressing governance problems: (1) self-actional approaches in terms of governance through either hierarchy or market are suitable for addressing simple problems; (2) inter-actional approaches that see governance in network terms are best matched with complex problems; (3) trans-actional approaches that see governance in terms of an ethos or form of life in view of the contingency of the socio-political world are best for addressing wicked problems; and (4) we discuss the phenomenon of de-problematizing (wicked) problems: when instead of addressing problems, a readymade solution is forced upon an unsolvable or undefined problem, or its solution is displaced. These processes are especially important for political semiotics since de-problematization is one of the major political strategies of the highly mediatized world of contemporary politics.

As for the third crucial concept for political analysis—democracy—we move to various “processual” turns that have taken place in its conceptualizations seeing democracy as a dynamic cultural practice. In addition, we distinguish self-actional approaches to democracy as various large-N studies that define democracy in minimalist terms of core variables (such as the existence of competitive elections or multiple political parties and constitutional clauses that define the polity as democracy). Inter-actional
approaches to democracy are seen in different check-list approaches to core processes of democracy (such as enlightened participation and citizens’ control of the agenda of public politics). Trans-actional approaches conceptualize democracy mainly as a logic of meaning-making that can be analyzed in terms of its form rather than its content. Various cultural, discourse-theoretical, and semiotic approaches to democracy are viewed in this respect.

After having untangled the discursive and communicative core of the three major categories—power, governance, and democracy—we set the preliminary stage for making a point that we elaborate in depth in the next chapter: that the tradition in political theory that has taken the conceptualization of these core categories in discursive/communicative terms the farthest is the so-called Essex school of political analysis originating from the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. We argue that their notion of “hegemony” lies at the intersection of the three core notions of relational political analysis—power, governance, and democracy, and that it is at the same time defined in terms of the constitution of meaning-systems. We conclude the chapter by reflecting in more general terms what is political in relational political analysis by distinguishing between approaches that see the political in terms of a place, or “arena,” and those that see it as a certain process.

In Chapter 4, we relate the substantialist and relational approaches found in the social scientific discourse to various traditions of semiotics that also has schools that are more inclined toward self-actionalism (e.g., structuralism), inter-actionalism (e.g., post-structuralism, dialogicality), and trans-actionalism (cultural semiotics and, in addition, neostructuralism, which we also elaborate in Chapter 5). Though we bring out the congenialities between various trans-actional approaches in semiotics, we argue that the cultural semiotic approach has been methodologically most advanced, especially when it comes to analyzing subjection and boundary drawing—all the processes that are pertinent for students of power, governance, and democracy.

It is the topic of Chapter 5 to demonstrate that the core categories of the Essex school (Laclau, Mouffe and others) for conceptualizing power, governance, and democracy are congenial to the core categories of the Tartu-Moscow School of cultural semiotics. The synthesis of these approaches constitutes the general theoretical basis of what we will be calling “political semiotics.” Bringing in the Tartu-Moscow School to complement the Essex framework helps overcoming the
lack of methodological rigor of the latter, their undertheorizing of the notion of sign and communication, which leads to lack of tools for empirical discourse analysis, and their turn to Lacanian psychoanalytic vocabulary which considerably reduces their potential to be included among empirical social sciences. On the other hand: bringing the Essex school’s vocabulary to bear on cultural semiotics helps us to conceptualize sign systems, meaning-making, and communication in terms of power relations (or relations of hegemony). The crucial point emerging from this synthesis is that despite different theoretical vocabulary, the core categories of the Essex school (discourse, logic of difference/equivalence, empty signifiers, nodal points, articulation, naming, hegemony, constitutive antagonism) and those of the Tartu-Moscow School (semiosphere, discrete/continuous coding, center/periphery, translation, naming, dominant metalanguage, untranslatability, boundary) are pointing to the same underlying conceptual logic. In the second part of Chapter 5, we put forth an option of substituting various categories of the Essex school with the more developed and empirically applied notions of the Tartu-Moscow School. For instance, the general logic of articulation that the Essex school conceptualizes in terms of logic of equivalence and difference could be substituted with its ontologically equivalent notion of translation as re-coding from the Tartu-Moscow School. The notion of translation has been more thoroughly theorized and applied, including the various strategies of re-coding, the socio-communicative functions of texts that point to the relational character and mutual constitution of author, text, audience, cultural tradition, and context. This mutual constitution occurs in a space that is referred to as “semiosphere” in the vocabulary of the Tartu-Moscow School. It is a conditional heterogeneous space of meaning-making. The central features of semiosphere are its structural asymmetry; the presence of core and periphery; the principle of binarity—every textual entity is based on the binary distinction of internal versus external space; its boundedness by the boundaries of the translation function. Every semiosphere can be studied as a separate totality, but every totality in culture that can be analyzed is simultaneously a part of a larger totality (culture). There is an endless translation and dialogue between different semiotic units and culture in general.

Performing these kinds of meta-theoretical transitions between the two schools helps us build a theoretical framework that is a better toolbox for (1) studying the political/hegemonic strategies of constructing social
reality through communication empirically; (2) avoid the anti-empirical vocabulary of Lacanian psychoanalysis that Laclau and other members of the Essex school tend to turn to in their later works; (3) to demonstrate the relational character of the formation of subject and social reality within communication.

In Chapter 6, we put forth a concrete conceptual framework for analyzing the political, based on the political semiotic framework developed in Chapter 5. The framework is taken further through the semiotic model of communication of Roman Jakobson and its later developments in cultural semiotics. We relate theories of power, governance, and democracy to the Jakobsonian model of communication that distinguishes six aspects of each communicative act: emotive aspect (orientation toward the addressee), phatic aspect (orientation toward contact), poetic aspect (orientation toward message), conative aspect (orientation toward the addressee), referential aspect (orientation toward context), and metalinguage aspect (orientation toward code). In addition, these aspects can be positioned along the two fundamental tensions in each meaning-system or communication, theorized already in Chapter 5: the tendency toward metonymic articulation of meaning in which the differences of discrete elements and their (logical, causal, etc.) connections are highlighted, and tendency toward metaphoric articulation in which the sameness and equivalence of elements prevails over their discrete differences. We relate these aspects of communication and the general metonymy/metaphor tendencies to notions of democracy, power, governance and to the topics of problematization and de-problematization of policy issues as they are put forth in political science. As a result, we outline political semiotic categories and their general relational logic that could be used for analyzing political phenomena. But this analysis, in our view, is a form of explanation, not just conceptual (re)description. This raises the methodological questions of the nature of that explanation and more far-reaching consequences for conducting political semiotic research. These are addressed in the next chapter.

In Chapter 7, we take up the methodological challenges of political semiotics as a form of relational political analysis. Moving from relational social or political ontology to relational methodology has proven to be a challenge for the relational social science movement. This chapter tries to take concrete steps further in addressing the challenge. Every ontological position—of which deep relational or trans-actional sociology and political semiotics are examples of—always entails certain understanding of
research logic or *methodology* (not to be confused with *methods* that is the topic of Chapters 8 and 9). In this chapter, we outline the core distinction between causal and constitutive relations with which we started already in Chapter 2 in terms of explanation, research methodology, and design. We explicate in more detail the notion of constitutive explanation and demonstrate that this is what is at stake in relational (trans-actional) understanding of social sciences. We compare it to the highly influential form of causal explanation that is characteristic of variable-centered inter-actionalism in the social sciences. In the second part of Chapter 7, we explicate—with recourse to the philosophy of science—why constitutive explanation always entails abductive research logic. We untangle the specificity of abduction in view of the two prevalent logics in scientific and theoretical thinking—induction and deduction—and demonstrate the essentially processual and relational character of abduction. Abduction is a processual movement from puzzling empirical phenomenon to theoretical propositions and other observations making it intelligible and then back to the phenomenon through which both the identity of the phenomenon as well as the corresponding theoretical premises and statuses of other observations can change, and the process is never wholly final since the “final” result itself is a part of the process. We call the constitutive/abductive form of explanation and inference “context-sensitive code-selection.” In the third section of the chapter, we demonstrate why semiotic explanation is essentially constitutive and abductive.

In Chapter 8, we reflect on the method we call political *form analysis* that uses the Jakobsonian categories outlined in Chapter 6 for analyzing democracy, governance and power and the general logics of metonymic problematization and metaphoric de-problematization, and the methodological propositions of constitutive explanation and abductive inference as discussed in Chapter 7. Why call it political *form analysis*? One crucial aspect is distinguishing it from, but at the same time associate it to the influential inter-actional research technique of “content analysis.” The other reason is that with recourse to a founder of relational sociology Georg Simmel, we insist that it is the form not the content of meaning and communication that makes it political by tying it to the issues of power, governance, and democracy. Analogously, for Simmel, it is the form of the relations that make them inherently social, and sociology for him was envisioned as a science of the construction of social forms. The central idea of the framework is that not the content (i.e., substance) of communication, but rather the form (the network of relations) is the
crucial focus of political analysis. To put the underlying intuition very simply: one can talk about freedom (a liberal content) in a totalitarian form. And one can talk about non-political topics in a political manner and about political topics in a non-political manner. And the constitution of this form of communication is the primary focus of political analysis that takes the trans-actional abductive research logic to the level of methods. This is why we call it form analysis. We illustrate this method by a micro-level political form analysis of the so-called Estonian “bronze-speak” related to the riots of 2007 in the Estonian capital Tallinn, triggered by the removal of a Soviet Second World War memorial (a bronze statue) from the center of the city to a military cemetery. We demonstrate how through the proliferation of certain language in the public (the so-called “bronze-speak” analogous to Orwellian “duck-speak”) the issue of the riots of 2007 is de-problematized and never addressed in a rational-deliberative manner in the Estonian public.

We then provide a brief macro-level analysis of the constitution of the European Migrant Crisis as a wicked problem since 2015. Wicked problems of governance are not only unavoidable but both virtually unsolvable and undefinable for the parties affected by them. Therefore, they are often highly politicized, making attempts at governing them liable to fail in their own terms. Wicked problems cut across very many societal layers, so that, for instance, when trying to “solve” a problem of humanitarian crisis related to the European Migrant Crisis, one might exacerbate the situation by creating new and even more severe problems of political crisis (in terms of the upsurge of right-wing populism throughout Europe). On the other hand, being unresponsive to a wicked problem is never an option, at least not for democratic governments.

All this points to a significant feature of wicked problems: their “wickedness” is not so much a characteristic or attribute of certain problems as such. Rather, the “wickedness” emerges from the dynamic flow of the relations between the problems and their perceptions by stakeholders on the one hand, and the solutions and their perceptions on the other. Unlike simple or complex problems, wicked problems cannot be conceived in linear-hierarchical terms where the problem precedes its perception, which in turn precedes its solution. In both studying and governing wicked problems one has to take into account that solutions are constitutive parts of the problems (often problems become “wicked” after attempts at “solving” them) and that problems are not merely “mediated” but constituted by ideas, perceptions, and modes of communication of
the relevant stakeholders. Governing and studying wicked problems, thus, has to take into account that the latter not only need an urgent solution but refer to phenomena that are dynamic unfolding processes whose constituent elements cannot be grasped separately from the flows within which they are embedded and vice versa. This is, of course, very much fitting with the ontological presumptions and methodological prescriptions of political semiotics and relational political analysis more generally. We highlight in our example how the “wickedness” emerges in the radical untranslatability of different political forms of the stakeholders—most notably the emotive political form of populist political movements and the referential-metalingual form of those seeking to contain the humanitarian crisis. In the concluding part of Chapter 8, we take stock of the brief examples and position political form analysis within various methods and forms of explanations found in interpretive political science, rhetorical policy analysis, and critical discourse analysis.

In Chapter 9 of the book, we illustrate the utility of our approach by sketching out a more fully developed case study of the constitution of e-threats. It focuses on political semiotic analysis of various e-threats that were expressed in media texts that covered the Estonian identity card’s security risk in 2017. The discourse of cyberthreats contains strong and controversial meanings because the peculiarities of cyberspace remain intangible for average readers who do not possess expert knowledge regarding ICT. We explain the constitution of reference objects of e-threats (such as national security, private sector, and Estonia’s reputation as a leading digital country), the active and passive actors in the crisis, ways of managing threats and the various risk scenarios. Consequently, we also explain why and how the discourse revolving around Estonia’s reputation as a digital frontrunner gained a hegemonic status in the constitution of the entire crisis and bring out how various forms of problematizations and de-problematizations of the identity card vulnerability helped to sediment this hegemonic status.

In our conclusion, we take stock from our entire argument and reflect on various future trajectories of relational political analysis. The current book is a crystallization and considerable elaboration of our earlier works over the last decade or so. We have been writing on political semiotics and relational social sciences since our doctoral studies which for both of us culminated with dissertations on the topic (Ventsel 2009a; Selg 2011). In addition, we have been publishing throughout the years on the topics relevant for the current book both jointly (e.g., Selg and Ventsel 2008,
2009, 2010, 2019) and separately (Selg 2010, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2016a, 2016b, 2018, 2019; Saarts and Selg 2018; Selg and Peiker 2019; Selg and Ruutsoo 2014; Ventsel 2009b, 2011, 2014, 2016; Ventsel and Madisson 2017a, b; 2018; 2019; Ventsel et al. 2019; Madisson and Ventsel 2016, 2020). These works form the general background of the current book, and sometimes we draw on them even directly. Nevertheless, the current book can be read as a separate work that should speak for itself for those who have no prior knowledge of our previous writings.

Notes

1. For recent book length attempts to reflect on the potentials of semiotics for analyzing the political see Monticelli (2008); Makarychev and Yatsyk (2017); Puumeister (2018).
2. For recent book length attempts to develop post-structuralist discourse theory into a rigorous methodological framework see Glynos and Howarth (2007); Marttila 2015; 2019.

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CHAPTER 2

The “Relational Turn” in the Social Sciences

“Relational” form of thinking, as outlined in this book, leads back to pre-Socratic philosophers and acquired its modern form in the foundational works of the emerging field of sociology such as those of Simmel (see Crossley 2010; Emirbayer 1997; Donati 2010) and Marx (Ollman 1976, chs. 2–3; Ball 1978; Emirbayer 1997; Fish 2013; but see Dépelteau 2008, p. 52 for an alternative view). However, we should not view relational approaches as being merely replicas of those classical perspectives.

Mustafa Emirbayer’s “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology” is the most cited meta-theoretical paper on the specificity of “relational” approaches in the social sciences.¹ There he writes: “Sociologists today are faced with a fundamental dilemma: whether to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily in substances or in processes, in static ‘things’ or in dynamic, unfolding relations” (Emirbayer 1997, p. 281). The first view in each pair (seeing substances and static “things” as primary) is referred to as “substantialism,” while the second view (seeing processes, dynamic, unfolding relations as primary) is characteristic of “relational” approaches. Over the last decade, the literature on “relational approach” has burgeoned with immense speed. Two decades after Emirbayer’s “Manifesto” “relational thinking” has spread to interdisciplinary issues such as “risk assessment for suicide, qualitative methods, social theory, the study of radicalization, emotions, music, football fan clubs, social movements, family farm resilience, the study of personal decisions and

¹ © The Author(s) 2020
P. Selg and A. Ventsel, Introducing Relational Political Analysis, Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-48780-5_2
We can witness increasing talk of “relational turn” in disciplines as diverse as geography (Jones 2009), sociology (Dépelteau 2013, 2018b; Prandini 2015), political science (McClurg and Young 2011; Selg 2016a, b), leadership (Uhl-Bien and Odina 2012), or even psychoanalysis (Carmeli and Blass 2010). Most of the old and new topics of sociology and political science have had their “relational” treatment, including postcolonialism (Go 2013), social movements (Goldstone 2004), democratization (Heller and Evans 2010), and even terrorism (Alimi 2011). And last, but not least there is The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology (Dépelteau 2018a) of more than 600 pages, covering major topics, perspectives, and thinkers associated with this intellectual movement.

One of the calls for “relational” approach to social affairs was in the double volume special issue of American Behavioral Scientist [ABS] (Wilson and Roscigno 2014; Roscigno and Wilson 2014a) with the subtitle “The Relational Foundations of Inequality at Work.” According to the editors, “the volumes are meant to prod if not challenge social scientists to move beyond analyses of individual attributes or aggregate disadvantages and think creatively (and indeed sociologically) by more explicitly incorporating relational processes into theoretical conceptions and analyses” (Roscigno and Wilson 2014b, pp. 219–220). For the studies of inequality this would entail acknowledging that it is not only “individual psychological biases or processes,” “human capital attributes,” or “broad disparities” that need to be taken into account, but “more deeply sociological and relevant… are processes that are inherently relational, unfolding at the intersection of status, interaction, culture, and structure” (ibid., 220).

This double-volume is an important document for two reasons. First, it indicates that there is a perceived need for programmatic “calls” for relational approaches in the social sciences that are contradistinguished with “substantialism” more than 15 years after Emirbayer published his “Manifesto.” And this despite his later indication that in the meantime “the discourse seems gradually, almost imperceptibly, to have shifted from an adversarial to a paradigm-building spirit, from negative to positive, from critical to affirmative” (Emirbayer 2013, p. 209). Second, for all its merits, this double-volume is a document of the ambiguity of the
The qualifier “relational” that is so widely used these days in various disciplines ranging from quantum physics and theology (see Polkinghorne 2010), social psychology (see Fiske 1991; Ritzer 2001, ch. 6), and sociology (see Donati 2010; Crossley 2010) to economics (Lawson 1997, ch. 12; 2003, ch. 2; Zelizer 2012; Wherry 2014) and organizational learning inspired by Gregory Bateson’s (1972) theory of learning (see Tosey et al. 2011 for an overview) for characterizing a vast variety of (often incompatible) approaches. When looking at the contributions to those volumes of *ABS*, one notices that there is no shared understanding of “relational” (in fact, not all the contributors even use the term). Thus, contrary to the intentions of Emirbayer’s “Manifesto,” these volumes actually contribute to the proliferation of ambiguity about the meaning of “relational” approach.

Therefore, the current chapter proceeds as follows. In the next section, we will put forth a concise vocabulary for distinguishing relational approaches from substantialist approaches by arguing that the specificity of “relational” approach is not in their emphasis on the importance of relations in conceptualizing social reality, but in their—explicit or tacit—presumption that those relations are constitutive rather than (Humean) causal in their character. In the second section of our argument, we will “test” our central thesis on both authors who are considered to be paradigmatic representatives of “relational” approaches as well as on several meta-theoretical perspectives that see the specificity of the approach in viewing social action as “trans-action,” rather than “self-action” or “inter-action.” Therefore, we need to articulate these three notions that originate from Dewey and Bentley’s (1949) book *Knowing and the Known*. This distinction is widely used among relational sociologists since Emirbayer’s Manifesto (see Morgner 2019 for the most recent collection of essays on this). In the third section, we briefly compare substantialist and relational views on (social) processes.

Before we proceed, a terminological remark. There is no firm canon of word use about the “-isms” under consideration in this book. We will mostly use the term “relational” or “relationalism” for characterizing an approach that sees relations as primary compared to the elements between/among which the relations are, and we will use “substantialist” approaches” or more concisely “substantialism” for designating approaches according to which the elements are primary and the relations secondary. This is the most common usage (see Emirbayer 1997 and the various contributions in Dépelteau and Powell 2013 and Powell and
Dépelteau 2013). However, in some important treatments of the topic, both “relational” and “relationalism” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Jackson and Nexon 1999) and sometimes even the third version “relationalism” are used (see Dépelteau 2008; Ritzer 2001, ch. 6). Moreover, even instead of “substantialist” (“-ism”) sometimes the word “substantivist” is used (see Wildman 2010) for marking the counter position for relationalism. Conceptually, rather than terminologically speaking, the range of “-isms” that are, or could be counterposed to relational approaches is far more extensive than the linguistic variety. We will indicate them when we consider different versions and sub-versions of “substantialism.”

2.1 To Relate Is to Constitute, Not Just Cause

Characterizing some or other approach as being “relational” could not be based simply on the fact that it highlights the importance of relations between social entities. It is hard to imagine a social scientific approach that would not presume social relations to be a crucial focus of social research. So, it must be something else. Initially, we could say that it is not just relations per se that are important from the relational perspective, but that those relations are seen as reciprocal, multi-polar, interdependent, and processual (see Elias 1978; Emirbayer 1997; Dépelteau 2008, 2018b). Therefore, A’s relation to B is always B’s relation to A and vice versa. Even more so, and more radically: from the relational perspective A is A only due to its relation to B and B is B only due to its relation to A. In other words, neither A nor B would be what they are outside the reciprocal, multi-polar, interdependent, and processual relation of A and B. To borrow the terminology from Bachrach and Baratz (1975), “power wielder” is a “power wielder” only due to its relation to a “power receiver” and “power receiver” is a “power receiver” only due to its relationship to a “power wielder.” And to highlight the processual character of those relations we could say that A’s actions toward B make him/her/it a “power wielder” only due to the actions of B as a “power receiver” toward A, and in turn B’s actions toward A make him/her/it a “power receiver” only due to the actions of A as a “power wielder” toward B. For instance, from the relational perspective A cannot be a subordinator of B without B’s complying with A’s subordination and B cannot comply without A’s subordination.
But can we expand this view on social relations to a more general understanding of how “things” emerge from relationships? Can we say that there is no hammer without a nail (and vice versa)? From the relational perspective: yes, we can!

2.1.1 There’s No Hammer Without a Nail! On the Constitution of “Things”

More generally from the relational perspective “the world consists not of discrete and readily individuable ‘things’ but of ‘relations’” meaning that what we in our commonsense view as a “thing” “is not an individuated object, but a relation which is viewed abstractly, i.e. one-sidedly” (Ball 1978, p. 104). Even the most palpable “things” we are surrounded by in our everyday settings are perceivable as “relations,” since

it is not the shape, size, weight, or space-time locus that makes a table a table or a chair a chair; it is the human use to which each is put. Tables, chairs, diners, food, eating utensils, etc., constitute an ensemble of relations; and it is by virtue of its location within this ensemble – and not its mere bodily existence or space-time locus – that each of these elements is what it is. (ibid.)

For instance, a hammer seems to be very straightforwardly one separate thing and a nail another and

[a] contingent causal relation could conceivably hold between the movement of the one and the subsequent movement of the other. That a causal relation exists between them is established by ‘observation’ and ‘experience’: The striking of nails with hammers is ‘constantly conjoined’ with the movement of nails. (ibid., italics added)

This is the view that sees discrete entities as being primary or existing independently of relations between them. The latter are seen as “causal relations.” However, from the relationalist perspective

[a] hammer is a hammer because it has certain uses or functions, e.g. driving nails. What a hammer is, is defined relationally. Qua physical object or body, a hammer does not even exist. A thing is not a hammer unless and until it is used as a hammer, which is to say, put to human uses (driving nails, building shelters, etc.) by human beings (carpenters). A hammer is
what it is by virtue of its being a constitutive element in an ensemble of relations, and not merely by virtue of its size, shape, weight, or other physical characteristics. (ibid., p. 105, italics added)

We have to take notice that here we are not talking about entities and their “causal relations” but about constitutive relations: the entities are constituted within relations and the latter are not something parasitic or secondary of the entities, but something without which there would be no entities in the first place. These points by Ball, made already four decades ago, actually prepare very well the ground for our next claim, namely that all in all the specificity of the whole relational perspective can be reduced to seeing relations “between”/“among” social “entities” as being constitutive of those “entities” (for a movement along these lines from a Marxist perspective see Fish [2013], especially pp. 28–34).

2.1.2 Nailing the Hammer: On the Constitution of Constitution and Cause

The understanding that social relations “constitute” not only “cause” social phenomena is actually a pretty established language-game, having its roots in the distinction between “internal” and “external” relations leading back to Kant and Hegel (see Bhaskar 2005, pp. 46–48) or even Leibniz (see Kusch 1991; Heiskala 2001, 2003, ch. 13). In contemporary social/political theory, this language-game comprises of various schools of thought ranging from phenomenological sociology (Schutz 1967, 1970) to discussions of “constitutive rules” in analytic social philosophy (Searle 1995, pp. 43–48; 2010, pp. 96–97), “narrative constitution of identity” (Somers 1994) or post-structuralist political theory with notions like “constitutive outside,” “constitutive antagonism” or even “constitutive impossibility” and “constitutive lack” (Torfing 2009; see also Mouffe 1993, 2000, 2005, 2013; Laclau 1990, 1996). Even a proposal for “radical relationalism” has been put forth containing an explicit guideline to “treat relations as constitutive of objects” (Powell 2013, p. 190). What is meant, however, by “constitutive relations” or “constituting” in the first place, has most clearly been explicated in outlines of constructivist approaches to international relations as they started to emerge in the 1980s and ‘90s (Onuf 1989; Wendt 1998, 1999; see also Barnett and Duvall 2005, pp. 9–11). We will now take recourse to the latter through
Alexander Wendt’s influential discussion of causal vs constitutive relations. First, some points about the differences between these relations:

In a causal relationship an antecedent condition X generates an effect Y. This assumes that X is temporally prior to and thus exists independently of Y. In a constitutive relationship X is what it is in virtue of its relation to Y. X presupposes Y, and as such there is no temporal disjunction; their relationship is necessary rather than contingent. (Wendt 1999, p. 25)

What should be highlighted is that when postulating that “their relationship is necessary rather than contingent” Wendt, of course, is not proposing a sort of deterministic perspective that sees all relations as being necessary between entities. What he has in mind is that within this relation, their relation is necessary for the parts of the relation to be what they are. In other words, “X is what it is in virtue of its relation to Y” and in the case of constitutive relations X cannot be X and then generate Y. But that doesn’t mean that the very relation between X and Y itself is necessary. That there is a relationship in which Xs and Ys are constitutive is utterly contingent and the relation as such could as well be non-existent.

At any rate when we are talking about some X as constituting the properties of Y, then we could generalize Wendt’s more specific characterization of the constitutive role of internal structure of phenomena by saying that X does not cause the properties of Y in the sense of “being antecedent conditions for independently existing effects, but rather make those properties possible” (Wendt 1999, p. 83). Consequently, Wendt enunciates most clearly what does it mean to “constitute” something when he discusses the constitutive effects of ideas and social structures on various phenomena: “Ideas or social structures have constitutive effects when they create phenomena—properties, powers, dispositions, meanings, etc.—that are conceptually or logically dependent on those ideas or structures, that exist only ‘in virtue of’ them” (Wendt 1999, p. 88). For instance: “The causal powers of the master do not exist apart from his relation to the slave; terrorism does not exist apart from a national security discourse that defines ‘terrorism’” (ibid.). Constitutive effects are different from causal effects “because they violate the requirements of independent existence and temporal asymmetry” (ibid.). In fact, even our ordinary language use captures the difference: “we do not say that slaves ‘cause’ masters, or that a security discourse ‘causes’ terrorism. On the other hand, it is clear that the master-slave relation and security discourse
are relevant to the construction of masters or terrorism, since without them there would not be masters or terrorism” (Wendt 1999, p. 88).

It is what is encapsulated in this Wendtian point that informed our discussion above on the relational understanding of power when we said that from the relational perspective A cannot be a subordinator of B without B’s complying with A’s subordination and B cannot comply without A’s subordination. If we deemed those relations between A and B to be causal, presuming “antecedent conditions for independently existing effects,” the claims would be as curious/absurd as “B’s complying with A causes A’s subordination of B.”

Now by claiming that relational perspective is nothing other than presuming that relations between entities are primarily constitutive not causal we have taken a sort of meta-theoretical position in the debate over relationalism. We should now briefly “test” this meta-theory on the relational theories themselves. For this, we will turn to a relatively established tradition in sociology of contrasting relational thinking to “substantialist” or “essentialist” thinking (see Emirbayer 1997; Crossley 2010, ch. 7; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, pp. 228–230; Fuchs 2001; Dépelteau and Powell 2013; Powell and Dépelteau 2013) in more detail.

2.2 Substantialism and Relationalism

For staging this confrontation we will here take our lead from two attempts at delimiting the specificity of relational approach that base their argument on Dewey and Bentley’s (1949) vocabulary of “self-action,” “inter-action,” and “trans-action”—those of Emirbayer (1997) and Dépelteau (2008; see also Dépelteau 2013, 2018c). Both argue that the “essence” of relational approach is seeing the social world as being built up of trans-actions contrary to the substantialist view that sees the world in terms of “inter-actions” or “self-actions.”

It is important to highlight here again, what we already alluded to earlier: that both “relational” and “substantialist” perspectives are about social relations and their relevance in the focus of social inquiry. It is the difference in their understanding of the meaning and function of relations that distinguishes them, not their orientation to relations in general. In the next two sections, we will concentrate on substantialist understanding which presumes that various substances (things, beings, essences) are the fundamental units of all inquiry. Analysis has to begin with “these self-subsistent entities, which come ‘preformed,’ and only then to consider the
dynamic flows in which they subsequently involve themselves” (Emirbayer 1997, pp. 281–282). We could think about this world-view through the metaphor Elias has provided for illustrating how our natural languages reduce reality to static things that could be viewed separately from the dynamic processes that constitute them: “We say, ‘The wind is blowing,’ as if the wind were actually a thing at rest which, at a given point in time, begins to move and blow. We speak as if wind could exist which did not blow” (1978, p. 112). Thus, from the relational perspective, substantialism would be like imagining winds that do not blow. There are different versions (and sub-versions) of substantialism which we look at in terms of self-action and inter-action.

2.2.1 Self-Action: Did the Wind Start to Blow or the Blow Start the Wind?

The self-action-oriented view of (social) reality presumes, according to Dewey and Bentley, that social things “are viewed as acting under their own powers” (1949, p. 108). This is our spontaneous view of the world as we would express it with our everyday language in which the world is inhabited by concrete things and other forms of beings rather than being constituted within continuous processual relations (Selg 2018, p. 539). We assign properties (“tall,” “heavy,” “red”) to “things” and “beings” and have them being engaged in activities (“running,” “blowing,” “walking”). Thus, substances move independently of all other substances. This is the view that leads back to ancient atomism in metaphysics and “political atomism” in modern political theory (Taylor 1985). In the social sciences it is largely represented by methodological individualism, leading back to at least seventeenth-century Hobbesian/Lockean “liberalism,” or its reverse, methodological holism, having its roots in Durkheim’s discussion of “social facts.” Methodological individualism is a reductive thesis that one can deduce statements about social phenomena (institutions, structures, groups, social change, etc.) from statements about individuals or individual actions. Individualist perspectives in social psychology (see Ritzer 2001, pp. 131–132) and sociology (like in exchange theory of Homans [1961, 1964], Blau [1964], and Emerson [1962, 1964]) all share the methodological individualism that is most clearly expressed in rational choice perspectives in political analysis. Rational choice is usually depicted as a success story in political science (see Dowding [2009] for concise and loyal overview of rational choice theory’s potential for
analyzing power), despite there being some very influential critiques of the entire perspective (see Green and Shapiro [1994] for an extensive and non-loyal critique of its use in political science). However, Hay has argued that the supposedly actor-oriented (i.e., individualist) perspective of rational choice, in fact, ends up in a “paradoxical structuralism” where “the actor is deemed autonomous and free to choose—if only to choose the sole ‘rational’ option in any given context” (2004, p. 54; see also 2002, ch. 3). This conflation of “choice” and “structural determination” has enabled rational choice to advocate a naturalist (predictive) political science allowing “rational choice theorists to deal (ostensibly) with questions of choice and agency, which would normally entail some recognition of the indeterminacy of political outcomes, without ever having to concede the open-ended nature of political systems and the contingency of political dynamics” (Hay 2004, p. 54). In fact, this kind of conflation is haunting most of the self-actional perspectives that postulate some “powers” the actors (or structures for that matter) are supposed to use in their conduct, instead of concentrating on the empirical constitution of structures and agents in social relations. Hay is, though not using this vocabulary, moving toward the latter direction with his call for using rational choice perspective not as theory of human conduct, but “more as a set of analytical strategies for exploring the logical consequences of a given set of heuristic or imported assumptions” or as a “device in punc-
turing convenient myths, problematizing taken for granted assumptions and, above all, warning of the perverse consequences of institutional (and other) incentives to instrumentally rational action” (ibid., 45).

Methodological holism or structuralism is a reverse form of self-actionalism “posit[ing] not individuals but self-subsistent ‘societies,’ ‘structures,’ or ‘social systems’ as the exclusive sources of action” (Emirbayer 1997, p. 285). Such holism proceeds as if “groups, nations, cultures, and other reified substances do all of the acting in social life and account for its dynamism” (ibid.). In the holistic perspective social structures, institutions, systems, and social processes (like modernization) “appear as self-acting entities in many concrete instances of social inquiry” (ibid.). Though Emirbayer, concentrating on sociological tradition, somewhat cryptically and without providing references, maintains that proponents of such holistic perspective range “from neofunctionalists and systems theorists to many historical comparative analysts” (ibid.), we could illustrate what he has in mind by referring to a highly cited conception of “competitive authoritarianism” by Levitsky and Way
incumbents’ capacity to hold onto power – and the fate of competitive authoritarian regimes more generally – hinges primarily on two factors: (1) *linkage to the West*, or the density of ties (economic, political, diplomatic, social, and organizational) and cross-border flows (of capital, goods and services, people, and information) between particular countries and the United States and the EU; and (2) incumbents’ *organizational power*, or the scope and cohesion of state and governing-party structures. (Levitsky and Way 2010, p. 23)

In summary whether, conceived in holistic/structuralist or individualistic terms, viewing social reality in self-actionalist terms presumes that social structures and agents operate according to their own powers of which they themselves are primary sources or “as if their respective ‘powers’ would be ‘owned’ by the actors or the structures, or as if their ‘properties’ would be simply intrinsic to the actors or the structures” (Dépelteau 2008, p. 60). Viewing A and B as self-acting means that relations between them can only be (Humean) causal, not constitutive in the above sense, because unlike in the relational perspective the properties and powers of A and B are presumed to “exist outside or prior to social relations” (ibid.). At the same time, the specificity of constitutive relations was exactly that A can be A only “in virtue” of or due to its relation to B (and vice versa). The self-actionalist form of substantialism is like asking whether the wind started to blow or the blow started the wind.

### 2.2.2 Inter-Action: Blows Gone with the Wind

The causal character of relations between social entities is even more pronounced and explicit when we turn to the “inter-actionalist” mode of substantialism, which presumes a world where “thing is balanced against thing in causal interconnection” (Dewey and Bentley 1949, p. 108). In the social sciences, it would be the view according to which “entities no longer generate their own action, but the relevant action takes place *among* the entities themselves. Entities remain fixed and unchanged throughout such interaction, each independent of the existence of the others, much like billiard balls or the particles in Newtonian mechanics” (Emirbayer 1997, pp. 285–286). One of the most influential approaches
in the social sciences is the form of inter-actionalism that Emirbayer, based on Abbott (1988), calls “variable-centered approach.” It presumes fixed entities with variable attributes. The causal inter-actions between the variable attributes “create outcomes, themselves measurable as attributes of the fixed entities” (Abbott 1988, p. 170). In addition, it is presumed that “these attributes have only one causal meaning at a time” which “does not depend on other attributes, on the past sequence of attributes, or on the context of other entities” (ibid., p. 181). In terms of the dilemma of structure and agency, the presumption of inter-actionalism is that “Structures and agency… possess intrinsic or a priori properties or powers (ideologies, interests, force, and so on); they manifest themselves by limiting the power of agency (if it is a structure), or by changing the structure (if it is agency). The form of the social world results from their inter-actions” (Dépelteau 2008, p. 61). From the perspective of relational sociology, this variable-centered inter-actionalism that purports to read out “causes” from the co-variation of variable attributes of fixed entities is like wondering whether it was the blow that was gone with the wind or vice versa.

2.2.3 Trans-Action: Wind and Blowing “Considered Separately, but Not as Being Separate”

With Dewey and Bentley’s notion of trans-action, we enter the relational perspective in the strict sense. Trans-actionalism would imply epistemologically and methodologically that

systems of description and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to ‘elements’ or other presumptively detachable or independent ‘entities,’ ‘essences,’ or ‘realities,’ and without isolation of presumptively detachable ‘relations’ from such detachable ‘elements’. (Dewey and Bentley 1949, p. 108)

Underlying this epistemological and methodological stance is the ontological position that Emirbayer expresses as follows:

the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction. The latter, seen as a dynamic, unfolding process, becomes the primary unit of analysis rather than the constituent elements themselves. (1997, p. 287, italics added)
This is but another way of saying that relations that the elements are engaged in are seen as constitutive (in the above sense) of the very elements themselves. Dépelteau expresses it most clearly: “any individual action is always one piece of a moving puzzle composed by interdependent actions: the actionA is the actionA only because it is interconnected to the actionB, and vice versa” (Dépelteau 2008, p. 60). Thus, from the relational perspective, one cannot posit discrete, pre-given units (individuals, societies, classes, groups, states) as starting points of social/political analysis. The characters of those units are constituted within various shifting trans-actional contexts or “relational settings” as Somers (1994, pp. 625–627) would have it.

Highlighting the constitutive nature of relations attunes us naturally to seeing relations as processes or acknowledging what Dépelteau calls “the principle of primacy of process” (2008, p. 62). A researcher adopting a relational perspective “sees relations between terms or units [of analysis] as preeminently dynamic in nature, as unfolding, ongoing processes rather than as static ties among inert substances” (Emirbayer 1997, p. 89). Different conceptual tools have been imagined to render the processual character of constitutive relations more intelligible: “figuration” (Elias 1978, 1982), “discourse” in the post-structuralist and Foucauldian sense that highlights the practice-oriented/pragmatic and diachronic aspects of meaning-systems (see especially Laclau and Mouffe 2001, ch. 3; Glynos and Howarth 2007; Foucault 1978); “actor networks” that “can be seen as scaled-down versions of Michel Foucault’s discourses or epistemes” (Law 2009, p. 145) or, for that matter, the very classical scheme by Bourdieu of the interdependence and mutual constitution of field, habitus and capital (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Swartz 2008; Emirbayer and Johnson 2008). The basic intuition informing all those and other conceptual imaginaries is that the “unit” of social/political analysis should be viewed as a “complex joint activity, in which it makes no sense to envision constituent elements apart from the flows within which they are involved (and vice versa)” (Emirbayer 1997, p. 89). In other words, they all try to avoid as much as possible in their conceptual schemes what Elias calls “process-reduction” that is characteristic of our languages:

Our languages are constructed in such a way that we can often only express constant movement or constant change in ways which imply that it has the character of an isolated object at rest, and then, almost as an afterthought, adding a verb which expresses the fact that the thing with this character
is now changing. For example, standing by a river we see the perpetual
flowing of the water. But to grasp it conceptually, and communicate it to
others, we do not think and say, “Look at the perpetual flowing of the
water”; we say “Look how fast the river is flowing.” … This reduction of
processes to static conditions, which we shall call “process-reduction” for
short, appears self-explanatory to people who have grown up with such
languages. (Elias 1978, pp. 111–112)

Thus, our language forces on us a certain “process-reduction.” But if we
adopt the relational perspective and see “behind” our language, so to
speak, we acknowledge that “[s]ocial phenomena are fluid and moving
like movies instead of being fixed like pictures” (Dépeltau 2008, p. 62).
Though process is irreducible from the relational perspective it does not
entail that there’s no continuity in the social world: “social universe is
full of more or less continuous and similar trans-actions (or social struc-
tures) that we call market, wedding, war, genocide, racism, exploitation,
domination, love, and so on” (ibid.). This only means inverting the
classical perspective of sociology regarding social change: not change,
but continuity/stability is to be explained and the relative stability of
social phenomena (structures, selves, identities, groups, etc.) “should be
studied as chains of trans-action” (ibid.). This means de-reifying those
phenomena (ibid., p. 63) or in our vocabulary bringing to the fore that
it is the relations—not some sort of essences of entities—that constitute
social phenomena as “things.” It is underscoring that: “An individual is
a soldier full of hate, a knife is a weapon, and a mountain is a defensive
wall or an obstacle, etc. when there is a war. In another trans-action, the
same individual is a ‘loving machine,’ the mountain a romantic view, and
the knife might become a gift” (Dépeltau 2008, p. 63). This, of course,
does not mean that mountains or knives don’t exist “on their own,” but
rather “sociologically speaking, the ‘properties’ of mountains are deeply
shaped by some contextualized trans-actions between social actors” (ibid.,
p. 66). Thus, in a war figuration mountains function as defensive wall; in
a market figuration they might function as some sort of tourist attraction;
but in the figuration of chess game they don’t have any relevance at all
and consequently “action and its environment are interconnected. They
‘trans-act’” (ibid.).
In a more recent consideration of the specificity of what he calls “‘deep’ relational ontology” Dépelteau summarizes the difference between relationalism and the two forms of substantialism we have been discussing as follows:

“self-action” refers to voluntarism or social determinism (the Subject or the structure self-acts on X), “inter-action” belongs to co-determinism (the social universe is made by interactions between structures and agency), and “trans-action” relates to “deep” relational thinking. In its most simple expression, transactional thinking means: A does not do what it does without transacting with B, and vice versa. A and B are interdependent. I am acting as a brother or an employee only because there is a sister or an employer to transact with. (2013, pp. 177–178)

We can see from this summary that what is meant by trans-action is equivalent to what is meant by “constitutive relations” in the vocabulary developed here. Summarizing this excursus to self-, inter-, and trans-action and their connection to understanding relations as (Humean) causal or constitutive in a more metaphorical way, we can read in terms of the distinction between causal and constitutive relations Goffman’s famous pun that Emirbayer considered to be an appropriate epigraph for his entire manifesto for relational sociology (Emirbayer 1997, p. 296): “Not, then, men and their moments,” Goffman writes about the focus of social research, and continues: “Rather moments and their men” (1967, p. 3). A substantialist perspective seeing social relations primarily as causal relations (whether in self-actional or inter-actional terms) would presume men and their moments. A relational perspective seeing social relations as constitutive (in trans-actionalist terms) would presume moments and their men. Of course, since our language, as pointed out above, enforces us to commit process-reduction, let it be reminded again that in case of constitutive relations, and contrary to causal relations, the and here does not refer to temporal order of priority: both “men” and “moments” mutually presuppose each other; “men” cannot be “men” without the “moments” and vice versa. From the relational perspective imagining the As and the Bs as existing somehow prior to the relations in which they are constituted, it would be as absurd as imagining a non-blowing wind. Thus when in this chapter we have, for instance, spoken, for the sake of analytical clarity, about the subordinator/power wielder (A) and the subordinated/power receiver (B) as if they were separated “creatures”
then tacitly we have presumed the same methodological guideline that Elias explicated with his didactic game models for viewing the changes in figuration of the game and in individual player’s picture of it: “They change in functional interdependence, as two inseparable dimensions of the same process. They can be considered separately, but not as being separate” (Elias 1978, p. 85, italics added). It is exactly this aspect that is often missed in many approaches that present themselves as “relational” as we see in the following chapter. However, as a way of concluding, let us compare the three perspectives by considering how they conceptualize process. It is a crucial question for chapters to come, since both relational conceptions of power, governance, and democracy (Chapter 3), as well as different perspectives on semiotic theory (Chapter 4), methodology (Chapter 7), and even methods (Chapter 8) are in one way or another dependent on what their underlying assumptions are about processes in the (social) world.

2.2.4 Relationalism and Substantialism Compared: Three Concepts of Process

That presuming the world to be processual is at the heart of trans-actional or relational approach has been highlighted extensively in this chapter. But the question is: do self-actional and inter-actional perspectives have an understanding of process? We could say yes, contrary to what might be superficially read out from Emirbayer, who opposes substantialism and relationalism on the scale of whether they conceive the world as consisting of “things” or “processes.” It is, however, true that self-actionalism and inter-actionalism are engaged in process-reduction in the sense of Elias as outlined above. But how does it work?

In one of the earliest attempts to bring the insights of relational sociology to bear outside sociology, Jackson and Nexon distinguish between two types of process, that they refer to as “owned” and “un-owned” processes (1999, p. 302). They continue: “Owned processes are ‘doings’ attributable to a particular ‘doer’. Un-owned processes are ‘doings’ which are not attributable to a particular ‘doer’. Processes in substantialist accounts are owned — entities instigate processes, or processes are reified as entities” (Jackson and Nexon 1999, p. 302, italics added). What does it mean to view processes as instigated by entities or as being reified as entities? Our answer is: to have either self-actional or inter-actional view of processes.
Although Dewey and Bentley and the relational sociologists inspired by them do not use this analogy at the terminological level, we propose that the main difference referred to with the terms can (almost) non-technically rendered as follows:

1. **Self-action**, as the prefix “self-” indicates, refers to an action that is taken up by individual and independent entities that might, but need not encounter other such individual and independent entities. All the required capacities and resources for taking up the action in question are contained in the entities. The world-view that presumes the world to be built up by nothing else but various forms of self-action is the first form of substantialism referred to by Jackson and Nexon above: it views whichever processes in the world to be “owned” in the sense of being “instigated by entities.” When it comes to social problems, it presumes them to be analyzable and solvable by dividing them into discrete, manageable units that can be addressed separately. Analyzing processes would mean asking for the causes of them, more concretely, the persons, institutions, states, and other entities that are responsible for them.

2. **Inter-action**, as the prefix “inter-” indicates, refers to an action that takes place between/among entities that themselves are fully constituted prior to action. This involves the second form of substantialism in Jackson and Nexon’s sense, the reification of processes as entities: it amounts to seeing processes as “things” between or among other things. In the social sciences, one of the most common methodological practices of this reification is treating processes as relations of covariation between independent and dependent variables, as we already discussed above. Why does this approach presume reification of processes as entities? Put very simply, the very act of measurement—whether quantitative or qualitative measurement—which underlies independent/dependent variable approach, presumes reducing reality into bounded observable units that can be viewed as values of variables. This is pretty obvious in various statistical analyses no matter whether they operate with nominal, ordinal, interval, or ratio scales of measurement. But it holds as strongly to the increasingly influential “process tracing” approach in the social sciences that often uses noncomparable and multiple types of evidence to support particular (causal) inference (see Gerring 2006, ch. 7).
A processual relationalist approach, however, would start with viewing social processes as *un-owned*. Hence the term ‘*trans-action*’ is used for explicating the specificity of this approach.

3. **Trans-action**, as the prefix “trans-” indicates, refers to an action that, in a way, *transcends* the entities, which are seen as *constituted within* this action. To adopt for a moment—for purely didactic purposes—a more essentialist common-sense vocabulary: the actions that the things or beings are or have been involved in are defining parts of their very nature. Social phenomena like institutions, power, (in)equality, freedom, and the like are to be (re)defined as concepts of relationships rather than as concepts of substances, properties, or dispositions (see Elias 1978). Selg uses the example of “sense of humor” (2018) to make the notion more accessible. Grammatically, we treat sense humor as a property of persons, as something someone owns. However, a person who would argue that she has a sense of humor without any *other* acknowledging it does not have a sense of humor (Selg 2018, p. 541). But besides being *un-owned*, “sense of humor” is an un-owned *process*, not a static configuration like, for instance, distance. If nobody finds your “sense of humor” amusing, most likely you do not “have” one. Reversely, if whatever you say is considered a joke, you probably do not “have” a sense of humor either—it is not only up to the “others” to decide whether one “has” or “has not” a sense of humor. Therefore, someone’s sense of humor can be considered an unfolding *un-owned* process, not a property or state of something/-one. Someone’s “sense of humor” is not only a relation between/among individuals but a dynamic process that (re)constitutes various actors as elements of the same dynamic relation they are part of (e.g., as jokers, joke receivers, audience, laughers, etc.) (Selg 2018, p. 541). In addition, humor is built upon cultural and intellectual contexts—it is hard if not impossible to have culturally universal jokes that land in every setting. Jokes only work if all those involved in the *trans-action* are aware of the cultural history, socio-political, and other contexts that the jokes touch upon (Selg 2018, p. 549). This is because jokes are *un-owned* processes too: even if somebody “makes up” a joke—as the colloquial expression goes—it does not function as a joke outside the relevant context of laughter and other reactions.
Consequently, we could say that although self-actionalism and interactionalism might as well be process-oriented, they are not processual since their orientation is either to find an instigator of the process or to reify it. To illustrate, Jackson and Nexon provide an example of different research strategies on how to study a spread of a rumor:

We expect that a number of readers will react by pointing out that the spread of a rumor could easily be considered an owned process — an individual in a group engages in a speech act which communicates information to another member of the group, who then does the same to another individual, and so on. (Jackson and Nexon 1999, p. 302)

Yet Jackson and Nexon quickly point out that if we study the rumor as an owned process we are not really studying the ‘spread’ of the rumor. Rather, we are studying how interactions of individuals changed the rumor — we have independent variables (the situational or individual variables of each dyad, a ‘sender’ and a ‘receiver’ of information) and a dependent variable (the content of the rumor itself). This is not particularly useful if we want to study how the process, which is the spreading of the rumor, alters the relations which constitute the group — the bonds between group members, the separation between members of the group and those outside of it, and so on. (1999, p. 302)

Thus, the processual, rather than just process-oriented research on the spreading of a rumor starts with presuming it to be an un-owned process that cannot be reduced to entities. It is processual all the way down presuming that “the rumor exists independently of the actions of those communicating it, even though it does not temporally precede the group in any ‘real’ sense” (Jackson and Nexon 1999, p. 303). Jackson and Nexon propose to “treat the spread of a rumor as a causal mechanism which changes the relations within the group, or even the composition of the group (...) with full recognition that the relations within the group and the composition of the group is critical to the way in which the rumor spreads” (Jackson and Nexon 1999, p. 303). Of course, instead of “causal mechanisms” which has clear inter-actionalist connotations, given how it is mostly used in the social sciences (see Hedström and Ylikoski 2010) we would prefer the notion of “constitution”—a topic to which
Table 2.1 Summary of self-actional, inter-actional and trans-actional perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of action</th>
<th>Relations</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Process-reduction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-action</td>
<td>causal</td>
<td>owned</td>
<td>looking for instigators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-action</td>
<td>causal</td>
<td>owned</td>
<td>reification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans-action</td>
<td>constitutive</td>
<td>un-owned</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

we will return in Chapter 6 when we discuss the methodological differences between causal and constitutive explanation. Table 2.1 summarizes the argument put forth in this chapter.

But now we move to one of the crucial categories for this book, the political, which we conceptualize in terms of power, governance, and democracy. What does it mean to have a relational view of the political? This is the topic of our next chapter.

**NOTES**

1. Here and hereafter, all the estimates about citation rates are based on Google Scholar database.

2. See Clegg (1989, pp. 45–46) on the “Humean view of causality”. All the discussions below presume this “simple” understanding of causality. For a standard treatment of causal arguments in the social sciences, see Gerring (2012); for their counterposing with relational approach, see Selg (2019) and Chapter 7 of the current book.

3. By As and Bs we, of course, do not have in mind people of “flesh and blood,” but something akin to what is called “subject positions” in post-structuralist work on power and hegemony (see, for instance, Laclau and Mouffe 2001, pp. 114–122) or anti-essentialist works on identity more generally (see Alasuutari 2004, pp. 123–127; Törrönen 2001, 2014). Thus, we do not claim that a person A (say Barack Obama) ceases to exist as a biological-historical-factual being as soon as his/her relation to B (say Obama’s subordinating relation to his direct subordinates in the administration) ceases. The biological entity with a certain life history that we might refer to as Barack Obama still exists. But the existence of Obama’s subject position as the superior to certain subordinates indeed ceases to exist as soon as the relationship ceases.

4. To be sure, Dépelteau does not use the contradistinction “relational”/“substantialist,” but instead “relational”/“co-deterministic” since his more specific aim is the critique of the latter forms of theory and
even more specifically to repair some inconsistencies in Archer’s “morpho-
genetic approach.” Nevertheless, what he describes as “co-determinism”
could readily be seen as a form of what Emirbayer, following Dewey and
Bentley, calls “inter-actionalism” and therefore a form of “substantialism.”

5. Including Bourdieu among trans-actionalists is somewhat debatable.
Emirbayer (1997, p. 292) does it; but, for Dépelteau (2008, pp. 53–
54) Bourdieu’s general perspective leans strongly toward inter-actionalism
(co-determinism), and for Crossley (2010, pp. 26–28) it seems to even
be somewhere between interactionalism and self-actionalism (though he
doesn’t use this vocabulary).

6. Crossley (2010) makes the same point with a different vocabulary:

Relations are ‘more than’ individuals who stand in relation, on this
account. They have specific properties as, for example, relations of
slavery or wage labour (or love, marriage, friendship, parenting etc.).
And, to reiterate, they define the actors who are involved in them.
Slave relations do not form when masters and slaves conjoin. Masters
and slaves only exist as such in virtue of the slavery relationship.
(p. 16)

Similarly, according to a very recent intervention (Pratt 2019), Dewey and
Bentley’s notion of trans-action “refers to the arrangements of unfolding
processes which cannot be specified apart from one another, extending
in time as well as space, and which, in the case of the organism and its
environment, deny the independent pre-existence of either one” (p. 11).

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CHAPTER 3

Relational Approach to the Political: Power, Governance, and Democracy

Having introduced the basic vocabulary of self-action, inter-action, and trans-action in the previous chapter, we now move to the issue of what does this entail for conceptualizing the political. We argue that the crucial categories of power, governance, and democracy can be conceptualized in relational terms when they are seen as issues of the constitution of meaning in communication or discourse. After considering self-, inter, and trans-actional perspectives to power, governance, and democracy, we turn to the crucial category of hegemony that can be seen as the core category of relational political analysis whose dimensions can be conceptualized from the viewpoint of power, governance, and democracy as certain logics of articulating meaning.

3.1 Substantialism and Relationalism in Power Analysis

Overall, the argument about power in this chapter is as follows. There are three different research strategies that can be used for studying power:

1. If we were to analyze power from our spontaneous substantialist point of view as being analogous to an object (like a table or a chair) or property (like eye color), then we would be interested in questions such as: What features of A form A’s power? Corresponding
to this strategy is what we will be calling self-actional approach to power. This strategy of analyzing power, which can be found in any social science field, has been around since Thomas Hobbes, who, in chapter 10 of his *Leviathan* (1651) famously uttered: “THE ‘POWER of a man,’ to take it universally, is his present means, to obtain some future apparent good.”

2. If we treated power as being basically analogous to “distance,”—that is, a static relation rather than a thing—then we would be interested in questions like: Which As are having power and to which extent and by which actions of Bs over whom they have power? This strategy corresponds to inter-actional approaches. Since Max Weber defined power as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance” (1978, p. 53), this has been a social scientific mainstream understanding of power in the Anglo-Saxon world.

3. The final research strategy for studying power would focus on the network of dynamic relations through which certain actions by the As emerge as subjugation through meeting certain reactions of the Bs, and through which As and Bs are constituted as dominators, subordinates, resisters and so on and are in a constant process of mutual (re)constitution, elements of which can be considered separately, but not as being separate. This strategy corresponds to trans-actional approaches. Perspectives on power, governance, organization, international relations, etc., that take Michel Foucault’s insistence on “the strictly relational character of power relationships” (1978, p. 95) as their starting point, are relevant here. Power in these treatments is conceptualized as an unfolding, dynamic, and constitutive process.

This is our argument in a nutshell. Next, we ground our position with taking up the relevant literature (see Selg 2016b, 2018 for a more elaborated take on this issue).

### 3.1.1 Self-Actionalism: Power as a Property or Resource of the Powerful

When we adapt self-actionalism to power analyses, it is primarily the powerful self-acting entity A (whether structure or agent) whose properties, resources, and dispositions are at the focus of analysis. As we
pointed out in the previous chapter, self-actionalism takes two forms: individualism and structuralism/holism. Individualist self-actionalism could be seen informing rational-choice approaches in political science (see Dowding 2009; Moe 2005); various “conflict” perspectives that in their analyses equate power with a quasi-Weberian notion of power akin to Weber’s understanding of legitimate domination or authority (cf. Weber 1978, p. 53), as in the works of Mills (1956), Dahrendorf (1959) and Collins (2004); “exchange perspectives” on governance that see the latter as basically a matter of “coalition building and voluntary exchange among self-interested political actors” (March and Olsen 1995, p. 7; see also pp. 7–26 for an in-depth overview); or “realist” theories in international relations (see Barnett and Duvall 2005, pp. 3–4). “Realism” in international relations focuses on states as actors and their independent actions and conveys a world-view in which State A would exist the way it does without considering State B, C or D, etc. Consequently, the concept of a state, according to realism, is self-actional (Jackson and Nexon 1999, p. 293). States exist prior to any relation to any other entity and their actions toward other states are based solely on self-interest. This has not changed much in the more nuanced versions like defensive realism (e.g., Waltz 1979) or offensive realism (e.g., Mearsheimer 2001) in which states wager on the threat or alliance potential of other states.

When it comes to structuralist form, various historical institutionalisms that set a “prominent role” for “power and asymmetrical relations of power” in their analyses (Hall and Taylor 1996, p. 940), could be seen as bending toward this direction. Structuralism in international relations views the underlying structure (such as the market) as the sole source of meaning-making (e.g., in Wallerstein’s [1974] World-Systems Theory). Probably, the most clear-cut form of structuralist self-actionalism available among actually defended and influential theories of power would be Althusser’s (1971) structural Marxism, in which the structure is seen as almost completely determining the actors, leaving no place for agency for the latter as in case of “ideological interpellation”: “ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing” (p. 174).

Sometimes prominent theories of power have elements of both individualist and structuralist forms of self-actionalism. Steven Lukes’ “radical view” of power is perhaps the most revealing example of this tension or
discrepancy. Intervening in the “faces of power” debate, Lukes introduces the “third face” of power (besides decision-making and non-decision-making) by asking: “is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have—that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires?” (2005, p. 27). Essentially, in this conceptual scheme, there is no role for B in creating and retaining power relations. The latter is completely up to A. And, in fact, A can be both structure and actor in Lukes’ perspective. For instance, when Lukes criticizes Bachrach and Baratz’s (1962, 1970) actor-centered theory of the bias of the system, he makes a point that “the bias of the system is not sustained simply by a series of individually chosen acts, but also, most importantly, by the socially structured and culturally patterned behaviour of groups, and practices of institutions, which may indeed be manifested by individuals’ inaction” (Lukes 2005, p. 26). Now it might seem that he is calling us to pay attention to the powerless Bs, but in fact, he does precisely the opposite. If one reads this quote carefully, then it is impossible not to notice that it is the “socially structured and culturally patterned behaviour of groups, and practices of institutions” that are the self-acting As which sustain the bias of the system. Lukes is making a structuralist point here, which is very close to Althusser’s about ideology that we considered above as a paradigm case for structuralism. But at other places in both editions of his book, Lukes is a defender of individualism. Haugaard has pointed out that there seems to be “a contradiction at the heart of the three-dimensional view of power [of Lukes], whereby the third dimension of power directs our attention to the systemic aspects of power while, at the same time, holding onto the view that power entails responsible agency” (2010, p. 425). Haugaard is right in the sense that there is a contradiction in Lukes’ short book. But we would put it this way: there is only a contradiction between individualism and structuralism that are both forms of self-actionalism.

It was as early as the 1960s when the viability of this approach was debated between the emerging “pluralists” or “behaviorists” in political science (Dahl, Polsby, Wolfinger) and the sociological “ruling elite” theorists. It was related to the debate of whether we can talk about power that exists outside its exercise (akin to some substance) that a self-actor can “have.” The behaviorists/pluralists “concentrate on power exercise itself” (Polsby 1960a, p. 483; see also 1960b). According to them, the “ruling elite” theorists (for instance, Hunter 1953; Mills 1956) presume the existence of power “outside” its exercise in the form of “potential for
3 RELATIONAL APPROACH TO THE POLITICAL ...

control” (Dahl 1958, p. 465) or “power bases” (Polsby 1960a, p. 483). It is common to see the pluralists’ (especially Dahl’s) intervention as establishing a “relational concept of power” (Clegg 1989, p. 50; McClurg and Young 2011, p. 39). However, the “ruling elite” theorists such as Hunter, clearly emphasized “relations” in their use of the word “power”: “Power is a word that will be used to describe the acts of men going about the business of moving other men to act in relation to themselves or in relation to organic or inorganic things” (1953, pp. 2–3). In fact, what the pluralists changed was not the focus on relations, which was already there, but rather the way of making sense of those relations. In our terms, they started moving the discussion from self-actionalism to inter-actionalism.

3.1.2 Inter-Actionalism: Power as a Relation Between Actors

Robert Dahl proposes operationalizing the concept of power into statements about the base, means, scope, and amount of power. The base of an actor’s power, or “all the resources—opportunities, acts, objects, etc.—that he can exploit in order to effect the behavior of another” (1957, p. 203), is definitely a self-actionalist not inter-actionalist concept. So is “the means” of power, that is, the various instruments for exploiting the base (ibid.). Methodologically, both the base and the means invoke research questions about the self-acting A.

Things get more inter-actional when the “scope of power” is considered. The latter “consists of B’s responses. The scope of the President’s power [over Congress] might therefore include such Congressional actions as passing or killing a bill, failing to override a veto, holding hearings, etc.” (ibid.). Finally, the amount of power is inter-actional since it is presumed—in theory, at least—to “be represented by a probability statement: e.g. ‘the chances are 9 out of 10 that if the president promises a judgeship to five key senators, the senate will not override his veto,’ etc.” (ibid.). So, the amount here is a probability that A’s use of his power base will lead B to (not) doing a certain action. This is basically a probabilistic causation statement, often found in inter-actionalist “variable-based” social analyses.

Consequently, Dahl and his behavioralist/pluralist school (Polsby, Wolfinger, and others) introduced inter-actionalism into the “faces of power” debate even if they barely used it in their empirical analyses. But they themselves weren’t very explicit about the “relational” character of power in their discussions. This is where Peter Bachrach and Morton
Baratz enter our discussion. Being the critics of behaviorism/pluralism and also the targets of harsh criticisms from the representatives of this school, they are usually credited with founding the discussions on various “faces” of power in Anglo-American political science. Their notion of “nondecision-making” (1962) reversed the focus of power analysis from concentrating on who prevails in public decision-making—the focus of the pluralists/behaviorists—to the processes of guaranteeing that nothing important ever gets decided. For our purposes, it is equally important to point out that they explicitly characterize power in “relational” terms (1963, 1970, chs. 2 and 3).

Their starting point is the Hobbesian self-actionalism, according to which power is “a possession which enables its owner to secure some apparent future Good” (Bachrach and Baratz 1963, p. 632). For them, “this usage is unacceptable” because it “ignores the fundamental relational attribute of power: that it cannot be possessed” (ibid., pp. 632–633). Thus, “power is relational, as opposed to possessive or substantive” (ibid., p. 633). There are three “relational characteristics” of power (ibid.):

A power relationship exists when (a) there is a conflict over values or course of action between A and B; (b) B complies with A’s wishes; and (c) he does so because he is fearful that A will deprive him of a value or values which he, B, regards more highly than those which would have been achieved by noncompliance. (ibid., p. 635)

These “relational characteristics” are indicators of inter-actionalist thinking. First, we can skip the discussion of characteristic (a), since it is not specific to any of the approaches we are discussing here: it is equally possible to have either a conflict-oriented or cooperation-oriented framework regardless of it being either self-, inter-, or trans-actional (Selg 2016a, b). Next, both characteristics b and c actually present a variety of inter-actionalist arguments that boil down to the following: A’s power over B is only possible if B responds properly to A’s threats. Characteristic (b) specifies this logic by establishing that “a power relationship exists only if B actually bows to A’s wishes” (ibid., p. 633). Characteristic (c) entails that “a power relation can exist only if one of the parties can threaten to invoke sanctions” (ibid., p. 633). But unlike Dahl’s self-actionalist discussion of the “means of power,” Bachrach and Baratz specify that the availability of sanctions gives A power over B only
under certain additional conditions. First, “the person threatened must comprehend the alternatives which face him in choosing between compliance and noncompliance,” thus giving power relations certain “rational attribute[s]” (ibid.). Second, the sanction referred to in the threats must be “actually regarded as a deprivation by the person who is so threatened” (ibid.). Third, the person who is threatened must regard the value(s) she is deprived in case of non-compliance as higher than other value(s) sacrificed in case of compliance (ibid.). Fourth, “The person threatened is persuaded that the threat against him is not idle” (ibid.).

The substantialist perspectives of power considered thus far lend support to our general point about substantialism—that it is based on causalist understanding of power relations.

3.1.3 The Causalism of Self-Actionalism and Inter-Actionalism

According to Hindess, the entire Anglo-American “faces of power” debate relies, tacitly or explicitly, on a “Hobbesian” notion of power as a simple capacity (Hindess 1996, pp. 2–10). In addition, inherent to the entire Hobbesian discourse is “a conception of power as identical to cause” (Clegg 1989, p. 26; see also Torfing 2009, pp. 109–111; Ball 1978, pp. 99–101). This is an aspect that is crucial to scrutinize before we can bring out the relational potential of the “faces” approach to power.

Hindess does not emphasize the “causalist” aspect of the Hobbesian notion of power very much since his discussion serves different purposes than that we are engaged in here. Nevertheless, historically speaking, this is an aspect of considerable importance. In the 1950s, in the context of the emergence of the writings of Robert Dahl, it was increasingly common to view power in “Humean causal” terms, like in the following example from Herbert Simon:

When we say that A has power over B, we do not mean to imply that B has power over A … [It is] a problem of giving operational meaning to the asymmetry of the relation between independent and dependent variables … identical with the general problem of defining a causal relation between two variables. That is to say, for the assertion, ‘A has power over B’, we can substitute the assertion, ‘A’s behavior causes B’s behavior’. If we can define the causal relation we can define … power. (1957, p. 5)
Of course, here Simon is alluding to actually none other than Hobbes himself, who in one of his less-known works states the following:

Power and Cause are the same thing. Correspondent to cause and effect, are POWER and ACT; nay, those and these are the same things... For whensoever any agent has all those accidents which are necessarily requisite for the production of some effect in the patient, then we say that the agent has the power to produce that effect, if it be applied to a patient....Wherefore the power of the agent and the efficient cause are the same thing. (Hobbes 1839, pp. 127–128, quoted in Ball 1978, pp. 99–100)

Although in his foundational paper on power (1957), Dahl does not underline the causalist vocabulary, the latter acquires the central place in a paper from a decade later (Dahl 1968) which is—given the status of the volume it is part of—a certain paradigm setting manifesto for the entire field of power studies in the social sciences. Here Dahl expresses unambiguously that “power relations can be viewed as causal relations of a particular kind” (ibid., p. 406) or as “a subset of causal relations” (ibid., p. 411); and almost replicating the quoted statements by Simon and Hobbes: “For the assertion ‘C has power over R’ one can substitute the assertion, ‘C’s behavior causes R’s behavior’” (ibid., p. 410).

According to Isaac, “this notion of power rests on a Newtonian analogy. We are all naturally at rest or at constant velocity, until our movement is altered by an external force. Power is that force whereby social agents alter the behavior of other agents or, as Dahl puts it, get them to do what they would not otherwise do” (1987, pp. 26–27). Similarly, Lukes acknowledges that all the “three views [those of Dahl, Bachrach and Baratz, and himself] we have been considering can be seen as alternative interpretations and applications of one and the same underlying concept of power, according to which A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B’s interests” (Lukes 2005, p. 30). Lukes adds: “those holding the three different views of power I have set out offer differing interpretations of what are to count as interests and how they may be adversely affected” (Lukes 2005, p. 154). Thus, power is about (causal) affecting something and consequently, the “causal view of power forms the basis of the entire three faces of power debate. All of the contestants agree that power is an empirical relation of cause and
effect” (Isaac 1987, p. 27). What about seeing power relations as constitutive of rather than causal between/among something? Trans-actionalist views of power make this explicit.

### 3.1.4 Trans-Actionalism: Mutual Constitution of Power and Subjects

Moving to a trans-actional analysis of power entails giving up the usual inter-actional or self-actional interpretations of notions like “decisions” “non-decisions,” “preferences,” “power wielders,” “power receivers,” “subjects,” “identities” and even “freedom” that are usually associated with power analysis. We should treat all the respective phenomena as intelligible only against the backdrop of the “relational setting” as Margaret Somers calls it, referring to “patterned matrix of institutional relationships among cultural, economic, social, and political practices” (1994, p. 72). Somers adds: “the most significant aspect of a relational setting is that there is no governing entity according to which the whole setting can be categorized; it can only be characterized by deciphering its spatial and network patterns and temporal processes” (ibid.).

This is basically what both Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias have proposed for analyzing power relations. Foucault is especially notorious when it comes to dismissing traditional “governing entities.” He ends with an almost apophatic “definition” of power: “power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (Foucault 1978, p. 93, emphasis added). This stretches the concept of power to almost to the extreme of being utterly meaningless. But this is one of the general consequences of taking a stance on power that is “relational all the way down” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, p. 974)—trans-actionalism definitely entails such a stance. Power cannot be a regional category referring to certain “level,” “area,” or “domain” of society: “Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter” (Foucault 1978, p. 94, emphasis added). Before we proceed, we should make this point more intuitive by returning to our figure of a “sense of humor” (Selg 2018) with which we tried to ground the idea of trans-actionalism in the previous chapter. Sense of humor is not a regional category either. We cannot say that sense of humor is a certain domain
of human relations or society; rather, in principle, all human forms of life can be conceived to be relevant for one’s having a sense of humor. To get properly attuned to this insight, the reader should just visualize for a moment the best comedians she/he knows. They definitely have a sense of humor (from the reader’s point of view at least). Now, can the reader honestly say that this is because they are specialists of a certain field called “making jokes” in a manner that one can be a specialist in making chairs or tables? Probably not. The thing is that it is likely that their jokes are never about jokes, but “stuff” like “economic processes,” “knowledge relationships,” “sexual relations” and so on, to borrow just a few entries from Foucault’s list. In that sense, jokes are immanent to them. At the same time, all those different relationships and processes are immanent to the jokes. The point is actually straightforward if we express it in non-technical terms: understanding a sex joke presumes that the audience understands something about sex not only about jokes; and similar logic is, of course, involved in understanding an economics joke, knowledge joke, etc. In other words, there is no “sense of humor” as such that can be put to use or not; someone’s sense of humor is a process that emerges from multiplicity of practices that constitute its participants as jokers, laughers, audience, successful and failed jokes, and so on. The reason is that someone’s having a sense of humor is an un-owned process as we outlined it in the previous chapter. From a relationalist perspective, power too is an un-owned process. Power as an un-owned process is constitutive of individuals as subjects, not something they own. Given, of course, Foucault’s constant emphasis of the mutually constitutive relations between power and freedom/resistance (see 1978, pp. 92–102) and “strictly relational character of power relationships” (1978, p. 95, italics added), the individuals, though constituted by power “are in a position to both submit to and exercise this power” and “are never the inert or consenting targets of power.” Consequently, “the individual is in fact a power effect, and at the same time, and to the extent that he is a power effect, the individual is a relay: power passes through the individuals it has constituted” (Foucault 2003, pp. 29–30). The processual relationalist standpoint on power, therefore, must conclude that the owner of power cannot be located, and power can derive from everywhere. Hence, the notorious claim from Foucault: “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (1978, p. 93). That is often misconceived—by substantialist reading that presumes power to be owned—that there is an ultimate “puppet master”
in every society. This would be analogous to presuming that there is a “primary source” for the rumors spreading in society. In a very limited setting, this kind of substantialism could work, if we are interested in, say, spreading of rumor among colleagues about another colleague. The same is true about power, as Foucault has also stressed: understanding power as “localized, static, or akin to disposable resources (...)” was intimately related to the establishment of the institution of monarchy” (Selg 2016b, p. 195; Foucault 1978, pp. 86–87). It is the contemporary setting, however, that makes it pertinent to “cut off the King’s head” in political theory (Foucault 1980, p. 121; see also Foucault 1978, pp. 88–89). Presuming primary sources for either power or even rumors makes little sense if we take the interdependency of social and international relations seriously.

If one keeps in mind that power is an un-owned process, Foucault’s points start to seem very intuitive. For him, power “which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffused form, does not exist. Power exists only when it is put into action” (Foucault 1982, p. 788). He points out that: the analysis should not concern itself with power at the level of conscious intention or decision; that it should not attempt to consider power from its internal point of view and that it should refrain from posing the labyrinthine and unanswerable question: “Who then has power and what has he in mind? What is the aim of someone who possesses power?” (Foucault 1980, p. 97). Methodologically speaking, we need “a study of power in its external visage, at the point where it is in direct and immediate relationship with that which we can provisionally call its object, its target, its field of application, there—that is to say—where it installs itself and produces its real effects” (ibid.). This entails reorienting our primary research questions about power:

Let us not, therefore, ask why certain people want to dominate, what they seek, what is their overall strategy. ... rather than ask ourselves how the sovereign appears to us in his lofty isolation, we should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts etc. We should try to grasp subjection in its material instance as a constitution of subjects. (ibid.)

It is in view of this that Foucault’s own distinction of different logics of power should be taken. Based on his oeuvre as a whole, but especially
his later and posthumously published works (such as Foucault 1977, 1978, 2003, 2007) three such logics of power can be deciphered: (1) a sovereignty-based model, accompanied by an understanding of power as akin to commodity that can be distributed, or as working through a mechanism of repression or saying “no”; (2) disciplinary power that works primarily through surveillance and the production of docile bodies; (3) biopower or biopolitics of population that works primarily through mechanisms of security. These three logics of power should not be understood as separate and distinct; instead, they form a triangle whose practices and mechanisms penetrate each other and intervene in each other’s functioning. Therefore, sovereignty, discipline, and security are neither “governing entities” (in Somer’s sense) within which power relations can be categorized, nor do they designate certain stages of historical development (such as social formations in the Marxist tradition). These three logics cannot be analyzed in isolation. Nevertheless, we can point out that different relational settings call for prioritizing different vocabularies: overall, the vocabulary of biopolitics might be more pertinent to conceptualizing power relations in a late-capitalist setting more generally, but one can easily imagine relational settings within this general relational setting (such as military conflict, operation of police forces during violent crises) that call more for sovereignty-based vocabulary. The intertwinedness of different vocabularies of power analysis actually makes perfect sense with regard to our metaphor of sense of humor. Returning to this figure for the last time, people who “have” great sense of humor (think of comedians who are very widely admired) usually “have” it through trans-actions with very different audiences and by having created very different jokes. It is hard to imagine a popular comedian telling similar jokes over time, and it is impossible to imagine a comedian using the same joke over and over. Therefore, one of the inevitable inferences of this is that it is impossible to locate the sources of sense of humor. They can potentially be located everywhere and derived from everywhere. And this actually is the only logical consequence one can reach about power too from the trans-actional point of view. Therefore, it is no coincidence that Foucault has argued (arguably notoriously): “Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault 1978, p. 93).

What is probably less acknowledged outside the circles of “relational sociology” is that a similar consequence is put forth by Norbert Elias.
For him, balances of power “form an integral element of all human relationships” (1978, p. 74). He sees power relations (and all the other human relations) as “bi-polar at least, and usually multi-polar” (ibid.). He illustrates this point with several counterintuitive examples:

From the day of his birth, a baby has power over its parents, not just the parents over the baby. At least, the baby has power over them as long as they attach any kind of value to it. If not, it loses its power. The parents may abandon the baby if it cries too much. They may starve it and, deliberately or not, cause it to die, if it has no function for them. (ibid.)

The example is meant to suggest that there cannot be a power relation between A and B that would be unipolar or one-directional (A having power over B without B having power over A). Although a baby’s power might be minuscule compared to that of parents, nevertheless, “whether the power differentials are large or small, balances of power are always present wherever there is functional interdependence between people” (ibid.). And “functional interdependence between people” is one of the crucial characteristics of human society. Of course, “like the concept of power, the concept of function must be understood as a concept of relationship” (ibid., pp. 77–78). And, again, like most sociological concepts, the notion of function has traditionally been understood non-relationally “as a quality of a single social unit” (ibid., p. 77), more concretely as “an expression for a task performed by a section within a harmonious ‘whole’” (ibid.). This usage “leaves out the reciprocity, the bi-polarity or multipolarity of all functions” (ibid.). Consequently, “It is impossible to understand the function A performs for B without taking into account the function B performs for A. That is what is meant when it is said that the concept of function is a concept of relationship” (ibid., p. 78). From this relational understanding, highlighting the multipolarity or reciprocity of all social relations, it becomes clear why “[p]ower is not an amulet possessed by one person and not by another; it is a structural characteristic of human relationships—of all human relationships” (ibid., p. 74). A final point from Elias to add here is that “all relationships between men, all their functional interdependencies, are processes” (ibid., p. 78).
3.2 Substantialism and Relationalism in the Study of Governance

We can define governance as the form of power that is exercised to address problems. For instance, developing their more specific notion of “interactive governance” Torfing et al. argue that “interactive governance may even be seen as a particular form of power that aims to shape and regulate free and autonomous actors’ self-regulation” (2012, p. 48). Various authors have either lamented the depoliticization of the notion of governance—as if it were just instrumental use of coordination to solve problems, that is not related to issues of power (see Newman 2001, p. 20) or pointed out that the very notion of “governance” itself (contrary to “government”) means shifting in configuration of state power (see Rhodes 2017). Thus, we can safely put forth this simple formula: governance = power exercised to address problems. In that sense governance, unlike power, is always a normative category, not only analytic-descriptive one. No matter how tacitly, whenever one speaks of governance, she/he has always some notion of how things “ought” to be not only how things “are” in the world. This comes directly from the notion of problems: power as such is neither right nor wrong, it just exists, as a fact; but power to address problems requires justification, that is—it can be right or wrong. It might be successful or unsuccessful in addressing the problems it purports to address. The most classical version of this argument is Hobbes’s idea of “state of nature” and through that the demonstration that governmental power or the power of the commonwealth is indeed justified—it is way more successful in addressing the problem of basic social order than all the available alternatives. The simple formula governance = power exercised to address problems poses at least three interrelated issues. (1) What is power (and its exercise)? (2) What are problems? (3) What is addressing? We have dealt with the first part in the previous section and seen that power has been analyzed in self-actional, inter-actional, and trans-actional terms. Now we distinguish between different forms of problems and forms of addressing them through power that follow the same logic: problems, as well as their addressing, can be categorized along the conceptual triangle self-action, inter-action, and trans-action.

Since governance is not only analytical/ontological conception, but also normative we call the three perspectives “self-active,” “inter-active,” and “trans-active” governance to highlight this aspect and argue that
it is the latter that is a relational approach to governance. Thus, the “-actional” in our vocabulary will point to analytic/ontological part of a perspective on how social reality works, and “-active” points to normative views on how one should govern, given how social reality works. Our use of vocabulary is in tune with the tradition of “interactive governance” (without the hyphenation) especially as developed by Kooiman (2003) and Torfing et al. (2012). The terms self-active and trans-active governance are neologisms (although see Meuleman [2013b] for what he calls “trans-governance”). Our hyphenated forms highlight the conceptual relation to the original Deweyan/Bentleyan vocabulary outlined in the previous chapter and are meant to bring forth concisely that the relational approach to governance presumes both a trans-actional view on reality (that is: on how social/political phenomena work) and a respective trans-active view on how governance should be organized. We also highlight in accordance with the previous discussion that self-active governance has two forms—individualist and structuralist—that correspond to classical ideal types of market and hierarchy. Governance in the narrow sense, often equated with networks, is inter-active governance. Trans-active governance—that we see as relational all the way down—is hinted to but not fully articulated in various recent works on metagovernance (especially in Jessop’s works over the last couple of decades, as we argue below), post-foundational views of governance highlighting the contingency of the social and the need to move from viewing governance as a toolbox to governance as a certain reflective ethos in view of liability to failure of all attempts at governing. First, we have to distinguish briefly different kinds of problems that governance is meant to address. A crucial category within this distinction is that of “wicked problems.”

### 3.2.1 Types of Problems of Governance: Simple, Complex, Wicked, and De-Problematized

Over the last forty years, a vast amount of literature has been produced about the consequences of the concept of wicked problems for governance (e.g., Grint 2010; Rittel and Webber 1973; Roberts 2000; Van Bueren et al. 2003; Verweij and Thompson 2006). Also, a fair amount of criticism of the concept has been brought forward (e.g., Head 2019; Peters 2017; Turnbull and Hoppe 2018). We leave aside the conceptual issue here around which these criticisms often revolve—whether the concept of wicked problems is merely a rhetorical device for framing certain policy
issues or does it have a specific extension corresponding to a certain reality as such. We commit ourselves to the fact that there are certain problems with features that one of the critics of the notion of wicked problems, Peters has put in an abbreviated mode, based on one of the foundational texts on “wicked problems” by Rittel and Webber (1973):

1. Wicked problems are difficult to define. There is no definite formulation.
2. Wicked problems have no stopping rule.
3. Solutions to wicked problems are not true or false but good or bad.
4. There is no immediate or ultimate test for solutions.
5. All attempts to solutions have effects that may not be reversible or forgettable.
6. These problems have no clear solution, and perhaps not even a set of possible solutions.
7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique.
8. Every wicked problem may be a symptom of another problem.
9. There are multiple explanations for the wicked problem.
10. The planner (policy-maker) has no right to be wrong (Peters 2017, p. 388).

Following the various treatments of the topic in governance literature over the past two decades (e.g., Roberts 2000; Turnbull and Hoppe 2018; Van Bueren et al. 2003), we can initially classify all problems of governance into three categories: simple, complex, and wicked problems. Later we will add the fourth type (de-problematized problem), which is usually ignored in this literature.

Many, if not most of the problems of governance are simple and technical by nature. In their case, both the problem, and its possible solution, is clear and uncontested by the affected parties. Solving simple problems requires specialists. All the routine activities of executive power ranging from issuing IDs and delivering pensions to regular activities related to border control are by their nature simple problems.

Complex problems differ from simple problems mainly by the following aspect: although there is an agreement among the affected parties on the meaning and definition of the problem at hand, there is a substantial disagreement and contestation over its possible solutions.
There might be competition among the affected parties over whose version of the solution should prevail, but there could also be genuine disagreement over the very meaning of the solution to a given problem. All this could be a considerable hindrance to reaching a successful solution to the problem. Nevertheless, we can say that complex problems are by their nature solvable and their difference from simple problems is quantitative, not qualitative. Solving complex problems requires cooperation among specialists. Implementing the priorities of educational policy could be an example of a complex problem. Although the government, the opposition, the educational researchers, as well as parents, teachers, and other affected parties, might agree that the quality of education needs to be increased, there could be huge disagreements over how to achieve this goal.

Wicked problems differ from both simple and complex problems qualitatively in the sense that in their case there is no agreement among the affected parties on neither the definition of the problem at hand nor about its possible solutions. In that case, there cannot be any experts or specialists in the strict sense, and often scientific and rigorous method-based approach to their solution can be futile. Wicked problems are usually characterized as being undefinable; as having constantly changing background conditions; as being often comprehended retroactively after a particular solution has been implemented; as bringing along other problems (often wicked too) whenever there is an attempt to solve them. Based on the literature on governance, politics, and organizational management, we could say that although wicked problems are not solvable, they might be governable.

There is another logical possibility: a situation where there is a disagreement about the nature of the problem but at the same time an agreement about the solution to it. This is never discussed in the literature on governance where simple, complex, and wicked problems are distinguished. It is, however, a potentially fruitful trajectory of research. Drawing parallels with various discussions in political analysis on “depolarization” (see Hay 2007) “as the set of processes (including varied tactics, strategies, and tools) that remove or displace the potential for choice, collective agency, and deliberation around a particular political issue” (Fawcett et al. 2017, p. 5) we can call them “deproblematized” problems that are “solved” by displacing them through ready-made ideological or ritual responses that are presented as universal solutions to whatever societal problems, rather than through attempting to address them. This form of “solution”
or “governing” is actually quite common occupying an important role in contemporary politics, increasingly characterized by “anti-politics”, “a broader set of beliefs and practices that demonstrate disillusionment, disaffection, and disengagement with institutional politics” (Fawcett et al. 2017, p. 6). Often the tactics of this displacement, as we will see is related to treating wicked problems as basically simple, solvable problems. In additions, various techniques to “cover up” or “spin” unsolved societal problems might turn them into wicked problems.

Table 3.1 summarizes the criteria for distinguishing different types of problems.

The classical list of wicked problems includes governing climate change, fighting terrorism and poverty, and planning sustainable social policy in view of an aging population. In recent years, we could also add here the European Migrant Crisis (Geuijen et al. 2016). Not only are no conclusive solutions in sight for this crisis, but even the meaning and definition, and the grounds and causes of this crisis seem elusive. At the same time, it is clear to everyone that it cannot be ignored—it needs to be dealt with. We will return to this topic in Chapter 8 (Sect. 8.3).

In terms of the crucial distinction made at the end of the second chapter, we could say that simple problems are owned processes as being instigated by specific individual agents or structures that can be held responsible. Complex problems are owned processes that are reified into manageable units that can be analyzed and solved separately from each other. Wicked problems are essentially un-owned processes whose constituent elements can be considered separately, but not as being separate. De-problematized problems are un-owned processes that are reified into owned processes.

Now, we are not arguing that governance should consider all societal problems to be wicked in order to work—far from it. However, it is the increasingly wicked nature of contemporary policy problems that has
given ground for the emergence of models and theories of governance that have moved away from self-active and even inter-active understandings which both prescribe certain instrumental tool-boxes for governance, to trans-active models that increasingly see governance as primarily a matter of communication or meaning-making, of creating certain ethico-political environment for responding to constantly changing conditions rather than providing a set of techniques for solving problems. Therefore, governance too, like power, can be seen first and foremost as an issue of meaning-making. We start with our discussion between self-active, inter-active, and trans-active governance.

### 3.2.2 Self-Active Governance: Governing Through Markets or Hierarchies

Self-active governance is based on self-actionalist ontology and takes two forms—market and hierarchy—as does its underlying ontological position: individualism and structuralism. Obvious versions of individualist self-active governance are “exchange perspectives” on governance (see March and Olsen 1995, pp. 7–26; Jessop 2016a, ch. 7). “Exchange,” according to Jessop “involves *ex post* coordination based on a formal, procedural rationality that is oriented to the efficient allocation of scarce resources to competing ends” (Jessop 2016a, p. 167). Thus, the “anarchy” of the market could be a paradigm for *individualist* self-active governance.

When it comes to *structuralist* forms of self-active governance, then all the modern state-centric perspectives on governance are pertinent here (usually referred to as “government” in the “from government to governance” literature see Jessop [2016a], Rhodes [2017], Fukuyama [2016, pp. 94–97]). It is the reified view of state system and/or government (Abrams 1988; Jessop 2016a, ch. 2) as self-acting on its subjects. A mechanism for this form of governance is command in the widest sense, including bureaucratic directives, enforced laws, performance assessments, and direct coercion by force structures which is one of the functions of the police.

The two forms of self-active governance are conceptual opposites as are structuralism and individualism. They have opposite logics of failure as pointed out by various generalized treatments of market and state failures (e.g., Sørensen and Torfing 2007b; Jessop 2016a, ch. 7). This conceptual pair helps us put to perspective various identified failures of
governing wicked problems. Self-active governance will fail because it is suitable for addressing simple problems, not wicked problems. For instance, Meuleman argues that the reason, why markets and hierarchies fail when addressing wicked problems such as climate change is that they both presume clearly defined problems whose solution follows either “clear line of command in the problem-solving process” [hierarchy] or putting “the ‘right’ incentives and instruments” in place [market] (2013b, p. 42; see also Meuleman 2008, p. 342). In our terms, we could just say that implementing self-active governance that analytically presumes a self-actional world-view will not work, because the reality of wicked problems is that which is captured by trans-actional world-view and should be handled according to trans-active governance to which we turn to below. Similarly, Alford and Head analyze the wicked problem of controlling illicit drug use. In our terms, they argue, first, that the structuralist self-active governance in the form of “deterrence – increasing either the penalties or enforcement efforts against illicit drug use” which is “popular among politicians seeking to project an image of ‘strong leadership’”—is “generally ineffective, if not counter-productive when banned substances are seen as attractive ‘forbidden fruit’” (2017, p. 408). The same holds for individualist self-active governance in the form of “market disruption – applying law enforcement to interdict drug supply” (ibid.). It is different from structuralism in the sense that here, not ex ante controlling the demand side (the drug user) through punishments (deterrence) is supposed to do the magic trick, but the interference into the supply side (drug dealers) competition which is based on ex post coordination. The effectiveness of this kind of governance is, inconclusive to say the least and consequently “may increase drug prices and redouble the efforts of surviving drug dealers” (ibid.).

Another example of structuralist self-active governance of wicked problems would be addressing the issue of the immigration from Central America to the USA in terms of building a wall at the Mexican-US border as proposed by President Donald Trump since his presidential campaign (e.g., Trump 2015). If implemented, it is improbable to stop any undocumented border crossing, and the hardship of immigrants to improve their economic livelihood will continue (Garrett 2018, p. 203). It might also lead to exacerbating the situation, by bringing suffering to adjacent parties such as private landowners, farmers, national parks, refugees and finally the taxpayers, since there is no way that the Mexican government would pay for it which on top of that could suffer due to jeopardizing the
NAFTA trade agreement (ibid.). It goes without saying that the relationship between the US and Mexico would be seriously strained if it came to the construction of a wall (ibid.).

The reason why a self-active solution (building a wall) is likely to fail is founded in the trans-actional nature of national borders. According to Walker “[w]alls are not simply about blockage. They are also about movement and spatial relationships” (Walker 2017, p. 173). The same applies to borders, who seldom are acknowledged as borders of interrelated systems and are presumed to be able to block flow and movement (ibid., p. 174). This does not work in reality where borders sit between complex and dynamic (geopolitical) systemic structures that operate on multiple scales (ibid.). In a trans-actional sense, the meaning of any national border is continuously re-constituted based on the relations between the trans-actants (states) it connects and constitutes. In reality, the meaning of a border can be rendered basically non-existent with the signing of a treaty (e.g., the border between Germany and France after the signing of the Schengen treaty) or in the most extreme scenario separate a single nation into two (e.g., North and South Korea). Seeing borders as merely a matter of physical deterrence of movement rather than continuous process of (re)constituting the positions and identities of trans-actants is, of course, quite natural from self-actional perspective of reality and the corresponding self-active governance.

Historically speaking, self-active governance has been probably the most influential view of governance flourishing in its structuralist and individualist form in most of the works of modern political theory since Hobbes. Over the past generation, a peculiar mixture of individualist and structuralist self-active governance has been developed in theories and practices of “new public management” (NPM) (Hood 2001; see also Pollitt and Boukaert 2000; Fukuyama 2016, p. 92; Hood and Peters 2004). This is an idea that Fukuyama considers being “the last big idea to come out of the field [of public administration]” (2016, p. 94). Even though its realization in practice has been almost unanimously considered a failure, NPM played an important role in the “hollowing out of the state” which in Britain involved the following elements according to Rhodes’s (2017, pp. 119–120) classical exposition.
1. Privatization and limiting the scope and forms of public intervention.
2. The loss of functions by central government departments to alternative service delivery systems (such as agencies).
3. The loss of functions by British government to EU institutions.
4. Limiting the discretion of public servants through the new public management (NPM), with its emphasis on managerial accountability, and clearer political control through a sharper distinction between politics and administration.

The hollow state is often considered to be the condition for the emergence of the third logic besides the two forms of self-active governance—corresponding to market and hierarchy—which is inter-active governance or governance in the narrow sense (see Bevir 2010; Meuleman 2008) as network governance with its underlying theories and methods (Sørensen and Torfing 2007; Bogason and Zølner 2006).

The leading author who defines governance in a narrow sense specifically in network terms is Bob Jessop who also uses the notion of “heterarchy” for distinguishing networks from anarchy (market) and hierarchy (state). He is a good starting point for moving our discussion from self-active to inter-active governance because according to him the main mechanism or “mode of rationality” of heterarchy is dialogue.

3.2.3 Inter-Active Governance: Governing Through Networks

In Jessop’s elaboration

[dialogue involves a continuing reflexive self-organization based on networks, negotiation, and deliberation that is oriented to redefining goals in the light of changing circumstances around a long-term consensual project, which is taken as the basis for negative and positive coordination of actions. Negative coordination refers to the tacit or explicit agreement to avoid causing problems for other partners or stakeholders when determining one’s own course of action. Positive coordination refers to active cooperation in the pursuit of shared goals. (Jessop 2016a, p. 167)]

In governance terms, this would be a movement from self-active (anarchy, hierarchy) to inter-active governance (heterarchy). It would be a
shift away from more traditional [self-active] patterns in which governing was basically seen as ‘one way traffic’ from those governing to those governed, towards a ‘two way traffic’ model in which aspects, qualities, problems and opportunities of both the governing system and the system to be governed are taken into consideration. (Kooiman 1993, p. 4)

It would be a realization about authority that would not be relevant in self-active governance in either of its forms, the realization that

Authority is not just a toolkit in the hands of A [as in structural self-active governance], nor does it link with a universal norm or abstract liberty which unfolds itself behind the backs of A and B [as in individualist self-active governance]. Authority makes A’s rational exercise of her or his power directly dependent on B’s self-reflexive doing and refraining. Authority in this way conditions A and B to co-operate minimally, at least across system and life world in a political division of labour. (Bang 2003a, p. 16)

This “two way traffic” inter-active governance “has a substantive, procedural rationality that is dialogic rather than monologic, pluralistic rather than monolithic, heterarchic rather than hierarchical or anarchic” (Jessop 2016a, pp. 167–169). It works “on the basis of continuing dialogue in order to establish the grounds for negotiated consent, resource sharing, and concerted action in mutually beneficial joint projects” and

depends on continuing commitment to generate and share information (thereby reducing, without ever eliminating, the problem of bounded rationality [the main cause of the failure of self-active governance]); to weaken opportunism by locking partners into a range of interdependent decisions over short-, medium-, and long-term time horizons; and to build on the interdependencies and risks linked to ‘asset specificity’ by encouraging solidarity among dialogue partners. (Jessop 2016a, p. 169)

This is what we can call inter-active governance in its proper sense (cf. Torfing et al. 2012; Kooiman 2003; Kooiman and Jentoft 2009). The analytical basis of it is in inter-actionalism, which has both affinities with and is different from self-actionalism, as we saw already in Chapter 2.

Coming back to the example of drug use, we can point to several pros and cons of inter-active governance. Alford and Head discern two forms of governance that could be categorized as inter-active in our terms:
(1) “rehabilitation,” “as when a judge requires an offending addict to undertake a methadone programme as an alternative to prison”; and (2) “harm minimization”, an approach “which entails accepting that addicts will inevitably consume drugs, in particular with needles, and seeks to minimise the danger of infection or overdose by providing for safe injection houses or needle exchanges” (2017, p. 408). The shortcoming of “rehabilitation” approach is that “it is by its very nature applicable to only a minority of affected people,” since “only those who have been caught abusing drugs can be subjected to this method” (ibid.). The danger of “harm minimization” is that “it may serve to make drug use easier and therefore more persistent” (ibid.). Even though arguably inter-active governance is way more efficient than self-active governance of deterrence or market disruption, it still has some limitations when it comes to tackling wicked problems like illicit drug abuse.

Similarly, an attempt at inter-active governance could be seen in Germany’s governance of the European refugee crisis in late summer of 2015. Basically, defining the problem as being a humanitarian issue, has proven to be a failure, even though it was in many ways an attempt to enter into dialogue—by establishing a Willkommenskultur toward aliens of various kind—with immigrants of both different background and status. Currently, we can consider this form of governance to be a failure even if at the time, there were reasonable grounds for taking this route. What has become known as “European migration crisis” never was only an issue of an overflow of migrants to Europe and the humanitarian crisis related to that; it has evolved and continues to evolve as a political crisis (the rise of right-wing populism in all European countries, including Germany), geopolitical conflict (related to general instability of the region and the Schengen area), legitimacy crisis (in many European countries, there is a growing distrust in major supranational European institutions and unprecedented disobedience to Brussels’ policies at the national level), etc. (see Alisic and Letschert 2016; Geuijen et al. 2016; Taylor and Masys 2018; Murray and Longo 2018; Streek 2017).

This leads to a more general point. We are not arguing that self-active and inter-active governance are useless. On the contrary, most of the everyday problems are quite simple or “tame” to use the opposite of “wicked” in Rittel and Webber’s (1973) classical sense. On them, usually either individualist self-active anarchy of the market, structuralist self-active hierarchy of the state or interactive heterarchy of networks
work fine. But what we argue is that there are certain societal problems—“wicked problems”—for which trans-active governance is of most relevance and in case of which the other mentioned forms of governance might exacerbate the situation considerably by de-problematizing them. In other words: self-active and inter-active governance fail at addressing wicked problems. Even more concisely, substantialist approaches to governance fail at addressing wicked problems. And this is both the opportunity and necessity for the emergence of trans-active governance, which is a relational approach to governance all the way down.

### 3.2.4 From the Failure of Substantialism to the Opportunities of Relational Approaches

In the case of self-active governance in one way or another ready-made solutions and definable problems are presumed. One may take one’s hands off and let the invisible hand throw the dice. Or one might have a project that is supposed to take top-down control over some bounded issue. There might be disagreements about solutions, but they are deemed to be more or less like temporary aberrations or breakdowns in a system which could be overcome by standardized expertise. Problems are supposed to be treated as given, not as continually emerging processes that alter their meaning and identity through attempts at treating them or at trying to solve them.

When one moves to inter-active governance one starts to acknowledge the interdependency of problems and solutions, the interdependency of various different problems that cannot be isolated, and the interdependency of relevant actors.

But what about seeing how not only problems, solutions, actors, etc. are interdependent with each other, but actually are constitutive of each other? This, we believe, is where we move to trans-active governance. Among other things, this perspective enables us to see that solutions might as well constitute the problems they are supposed to be solving. This is because the underlying ontology of this approach is what has been referred to as “‘deep relational thinking” (Selg 2016b; Dépelteau 2013, 2018), an ontology presuming the analytical “primacy of relations over entities” (Selg 2016b, p. 184; Jackson and Nexon 1999). Corresponding to this kind of ontology is a normative position that we call trans-active governance, a relational approach to governance in the strict sense.
3.2.5 From Substantialist Governance Failure to Relational Approach to Governance

Let us think again about the issue of drug policy. Suppose we do not only see it as an issue of deterring drug use, disrupting markets, rehabilitating drug users or minimizing their harm. In other words, suppose we do not see the issue of “illicit drug use” as mainly an issue of either drugs and their users and suppliers, but an issue of society/community as a whole. It is this insight that informs the argument “for strengthening primary prevention strategies, most commonly drug education of one kind or another,” programs that “take into account young people’s developmental context and experiences, and seek to address the social precursors to drug use, such as troubled family life, low self-esteem, poor schooling” (Alford and Head 2017, p. 408). These are approaches that try to “reinforce the work of professional drug educators with involvement from schools, parents and the community” (Alford and Head 2017, pp. 408–409) and take into account “that proposed interventions need to be aligned with the circumstances in which they apply” (Alford and Head 2017, p. 410), or, even further, recognize that “[i]f there is no ‘root cause’ of ‘wickedness’, there can be no single best approach to tackling such problems” (ibid.). In our terms, this would be a movement from self- and inter-active governance toward trans-active governance.

Our tactic in outlining the latter is to first gain some insight from some extant approaches to governance that conceptually are in tune with the relational ontology but use different terminology. Then we move to Bob Jessop’s “strategic-relational” approach that explicitly uses the same vocabulary and is also conceptually a relational ontology, and considers the consequences for governance he offers through his notion of “metagovernance.” After that, we clarify the key features of the relational approach to governance, which we dub failure governance.

Let us recall that according to Dewey and Bentley (1949, p. 108) the trans-actionalist perspective presumes that our conceptual schemes (“systems of description”) are always preliminary: we cannot attribute “essences” or “realities” to some “elements” or “detachable or independent ‘entities.’” The second point they make is that not only are our conceptual schemes preliminary, but they are used without isolating “relations” from “elements.” It makes little sense to talk about particular individuals, states, or even problems in isolation from the relations they have with other individuals, problems, and the like. The problem of
“refugee crisis” in Europe is constituted through its relations to “the rise of right-wing populism,” “legitimacy crisis in EU,” etc. Now, if we take these analytic points to bear on the literature on governance, then they correspond to the insistence on the contingency of the social/political world. There are no fundamental essences or “root causes” for social problems in this view: they are contingent upon the interweaving and constitutive relations from which they emerge and re-emerge, transform, develop, and re-develop in the first place. This is what contingency implies. And this is an insight found in various “post-foundational,” “post-structuralist,” “network,” “interpretive,” or “decentered” views of governance.

For instance, setting the stage for his edited volume *Governance as Social and Political Communication*, Bang argues that “governance signifies a break with essentialism, bringing contingency, convention, culture and risky, context-bound choice to the forefront of political and social analysis” (2003a, p. 4), leading to the “recognition that there is no naturally given social or political order, only temporary islands in time and space” (ibid.). Concluding the same volume, he argues that “governance is becoming a common logic of all societal systems in a world where complexity means being forced to select, where selection implies contingency, and where contingency signifies risk” (Bang 2003b, p. 242). This entails acknowledging that “[p]olitics cannot but creep into any high modern type of organizing, where no decision can be finally determined, where all decisions are made from earlier decisions, and where only a decision can decide what is turning a decision into a decision” (ibid.). It is this form of politics that “creeps into” public decision-making that is also of concern for Sorensen and Torfing when they conclude their edited volume on democratic network governance (2003a):

Social antagonisms are an intrinsic part of public governance and they must find ways of expressing themselves at the level of democratic policy making, but they must be tamed by the development of a democratic ethos and a grammar of democratic conduct that turn ‘enemies’ into ‘adversaries’ and replace ‘antagonistic clashes’ with ‘agonistic respect’ based on the recognition of the contingency of all political interest, beliefs and values. (Sørensen and Torfing 2007d, p. 315)

Of course, the vocabulary that both Bang, and Sorensen and Torfing allude to is that of post-structuralist political theory, especially that of...
Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985; Mouffe 2005). We will engage in a deeper exegesis of this strand of political theory at the end of this chapter and especially in Chapters 5 and 6. Here we add several points regarding the relevance of post-structuralism for governance theory. Most notably, it is related to the studies of governmentality originating from the later works of Michel Foucault (e.g., 1991). There is a broad consensus among governmentality students on the point that, as captured by one of its leading proponents, governmentality approach “provides a language and a framework for thinking about the linkages between questions of government, authority and politics, and questions of identity, self and person” (Dean 1999, pp. 12–13; see also Newman 2001, p. 21; Sørensen and Torfing 2007a, pp. 178–180; Torfing et al. 2012, pp. 63–64; Jessop 2016a, p. 173).

Thus, the main stock to be taken from post-structuralism is that governance involves different practices of governing subjects/identities under the presumption of the contingency of the social/political world. This has important consequences for envisioning normative aspects of governance. They are neatly brought out by Bevir who instead of “post-structuralism” uses the term “postfoundational interpretivism”:

Postfoundational interpretivism undermines the idea of a set of tools for managing governance: because governance is constructed differently, contingently and also continuously, we cannot have a tool kit for managing it. Interpretivism thus encourages us to forsake alleged techniques or strategies of management for a practice of learning by telling stories and listening to them. (2004, p. 622, italics added)

Bevir’s point is noteworthy in several respects. What he shares with other authors just quoted is, of course, the emphasis on contingency. He adds, however, a significant shift when it comes to the ‘form’ of governance: he basically points to the futility of thinking about governance in terms of sets of tools and techniques (“do this and that to achieve this or that”). We argue that in fact the shift from “tools talk” to what we could call “ethos talk”—seeing governance in terms of certain ethos rather than in terms of certain techniques or tools—is what is most important for conceptualizing trans-active governance. In fact, putting this normative point together with points about the analytic level made above: movement from “tools talk” to “ethos talk,” is a consequence of a movement from “variable-centered” analysis of inter-actionalism to a
processual approach of trans-actionalism. The thinker in taking those steps has been Bob Jessop in his version of metagovernance and his underlying strategic-relational approach to social reality.¹

3.2.6 Bob Jessop’s Relational Approach to Governance

Recently one of us (Selg 2016b, p. 198; 2018, p. 552) has argued that Jessop’s strategic-relational approach state power is consistent with the “deep relational” or “trans-actional” approach. In his recent monograph, Jessop summarizes his position by arguing that strategic-relational approach sets out to expand

on the claim that the state is not a subject or a thing but a social relation. This elliptical statement refocuses attention from the elements of the state to state power. In strategic–relational terms, state power is an institutionally and discursively mediated condensation (a reflection and a refraction) of a changing balance of forces that seek to influence the forms, purposes, and content of polity, politics, and policy. (Jessop 2016a, p. 10)

That Jessop’s position is consistent with what we have outlined as trans-actional ontology hardly needs demonstration: relational approach is everywhere in his oeuvre manifesting in statements like “the meaning of power and interests must be related to the relations among social relations in specific conjunctures” (Jessop 2016a, p. 95, italics in the original) or titles like “State as a Social Relation” (2016a, ch. 3). What needs to be explicited in more detail is how his view of metagovernance embedded in his strategic-relational approach could be a way of formulating a relational approach to governance in the normative sense.

For Jessop, governance in the narrow sense (Jessop 2011, 2016a) is a response to state and market failure. In our terms, it is none other than a response to the failure of self-active governance by introducing inter-active governance. Jessop calls it heterarchy pointing to its essential difference from other two “-archies”—anarchy (market) and hierarchy (state)—as forms of steering. Jessop’s point, however, is that governance in a narrow sense or inter-active governance is bound to fail too, and what he calls metagovernance is a response to governance failure. Of course, we must clarify that the failure he is talking about is basically a failure at governing wicked problems. We unpack this connection below, but here it suffices to recall again that many societal problems are “tame”
rather than “wicked,” and therefore both self-active, as well as inter-active forms of governance, might not necessarily fail in addressing them. Nevertheless, our main focus here is on wicked problems, and the trans-active governance we presume to fit best for addressing them. We argue that the analytical part of metagovernance in Jessop’s sense is closest to trans-actional ontology and could be called trans-active governance, which must be considered one of the distinct forms of governance besides inter-active and self-active governance.

Inter-active governance fails to address wicked problems due to various “structural contradictions, strategic dilemmas” (Jessop 2002, p. 240) inherent in it. But we could even say in general analytic manner—concerning the nature of social reality as such—that “given the growing structural complexity and opacity of the social world, failure is the most likely outcome of most attempts to govern it” (Jessop 2003, p. 106). Thus, trans-actional view—emphasizing complexity and opacity or processual character of reality—is what informs Jessop’s proposals regarding metagovernance or trans-active governance. In view of this, Jessop’s point is that we should take governance failure rather than governance success as our focus when we move from governance to metagovernance, or from inter-active to trans-active governance. At the same time, there are various normative dispositions toward (possible) failure—from fatalism and cynicism to utopianism. We will address them below in our outlining of de-problematization strategies.

What Jessop proposes, however, for an ethos of metagovernance, is different. We should start by thinking that failure is not an aberration or happenstance but constitutive of the social/political world. In fact, this is implied by the very idea of trans-actionalism: the preliminary nature of whichever systems of descriptions of reality we have, and the implied impossibility of final delimitation of whichever entity outside the always changing flows and processes they are embedded in—these points we made via Dewey and Bentley about trans-actionalism are actually indicating the centrality of failure when conceptualizing the social. It is not made very explicit in Dewey and Bentley, but is done by authors whom Jessop cites when he discusses governance failure, underlying his notion of metagovernance—Malpas and Wickham:

Much twentieth-century western life, including the conduct of sociology, is characterized by a refusal to recognize the centrality of failure and the inevitability of incompleteness. Thus, failure is seen as the exception
Malpas and Wickham put forth an explanation for such a tendency: “One of the reasons success can seem so much more obvious than failure lies in a tendency to treat particular fragments of social activity as constituting whole projects” (ibid.). In our terms: social/political thought has been prevailed by either self- or inter-actionalism that do not see relations as constituting entities, but rather see fully constituted entities as “entering” relations. Malpas and Wickham, however, are not convinced of such a perspective, when it comes to governing broader societal issues:

While we do not deny that there is a sense in which an activity like ‘getting out of bed this morning’ can be said to constitute a project with a clear criterion of success, we argue that such fragments of social life are better understood within much broader frames and, indeed, that such fragments can only be properly understood as significant in relation to much larger, ongoing projects. But such larger projects, we claim, are always failing. (ibid.)

Malpas and Wickham’s ridiculous example of “getting out of bed in the morning” could be seen as a rhetorical device for illustrating what would the tamest problems of governance look like—the definition of the problem, the definition of the solution and the criteria of progress in implementing the solution are unequivocal. The simplest act of self-active governance would do the trick in addressing them. The problems we are mainly interested in this chapter are, of course, the opposite to “getting out of bed in the morning”: no definition of the problem or the solution can be unequivocal, no established criteria of progress exist. These are wicked problems. Putting Malpas and Whickham’s point in this vocabulary: all our tame problems are parts of larger problems that are wicked. For addressing the latter, something like and “ontology of failure”—an ontology that sets failure among the core characteristics of social reality—must be presumed. In addition, a normative stance regarding the adequate way of governing such reality must be added. This is where Jessop (2003, 2011) steps in since he explicitly takes stock from Malpas and Whickham for articulating his normative perspective on metagovernance.
Let it also be pointed out that for Jessop governance and especially metagovernance is not about solving tame problems. Way more complicated problems than “getting out of bed in the morning” are actually tame problems, like the one he points to in the following quote (highlighted in italics by us):

governance and meta-governance cannot be reduced to questions of how to solve issues of a specific technoeconomic, narrowly juridico-political in character, tightly focused social–administrative, or otherwise neatly framed problem. This is not only because of the material interconnections among different problem fields in a complex world, but also because every governance – and, a fortiori, meta-governance – practice affects the balance of forces. (Jessop 2016a, p. 178)

This has critical normative consequences. Since metagovernance is a kind of “muddling through” (Lindblom 1959; Jessop 2002, pp. 51, 242) three principles inform the suitable ethos for it (elaborated most succinctly in Jessop [2003, 2011], but see also Jessop [2002, pp. 242–245; 2004, 2009, 2016b]): (1) Requisite variety; (2) Reflexive orientation; (3) Self-reflexive irony. We interpret those principles as examples of trans-active governance.

“Requisite variety” or the “deliberate cultivation of a flexible repertoire of responses” (Jessop 2011, p. 117) is the result of the recognition that simple governance solutions will not be able to effectively tackle complex or wicked problems. It, further, attempts “[to] minimize the risks of metagovernance as well as governance failure in a turbulent environment” and allows for “a broad and flexible spectrum of possible responses so that the governance mix can be modified ... flexibly in the face of failure” (ibid., p. 118). These considerations would be redundant in a world of tame problems for which self- or inter-active governance might be appropriate. In fact, “this requirement might seem inefficient from an economizing [i.e. self-active] viewpoint because it introduces slack or waste” (ibid.). But once we acknowledge the “wickedness” of governance problems “it also provides major sources of flexibility in the face of failure” (ibid.).

Next, the principle of “reflexive orientation” captures the disposition for addressing the preparation for the failure of governance processes, which remain hard to predict. Therefore, reflexive orientation describes the admittance that “a reflexive observer... cannot fully understand what
she is observing and must therefore make contingency plans for unexpected events” (ibid., p. 117). It further requires defining what would be an acceptable policy outcome in the case of incomplete success. When it comes to governance, this means the “inquiring in the first instance into the material, social, and discursive construction of possible objects of governance and reflecting on why this rather than another object of governance (or the policy problems with which it is associated) has (have) become hegemonic, dominant, or simply taken-for-granted” (ibid., p. 118).

Finally, the principle of “self-reflexive irony” is needed for “tackling often daunting problems of governance in the face of complex, reciprocal interdependence in a turbulent environment” (ibid., p. 118). To distinguish his approach, Jessop turns to Rortyan notion of irony (see Rorty 1989) that “combine[s] the ‘optimism of the will’ with ‘pessimism of the intelligence’” (Jessop 2011, p. 119). Most importantly,

ironist accepts incompleteness and failure as essential features of social life but acts as if completeness and success were possible. She must simplify a complex, contradictory, and changing reality in order to be able to act – knowing full well that any such simplification is also a distortion of reality and, what is worse, that such distortions can sometimes generate failure even as they are also a precondition of relatively successful intervention to manage complex interdependence. (ibid.)

The principles of “requisite variety,” “reflexive orientation,” and “self-reflexive irony” can be summarized as a reorientation from governance failure to failure governance. In practice, it could serve “to counter the rhetoric of partnership which leads commentators to highlight achievements rather than failures” (Jessop 2003, p. 106). Countering such rhetoric seems to be ever more pertinent, given that it is virtually impossible to acknowledge all the conditions of action and anticipate all the consequences when it comes to the most significant objects of governance of our time such as climate change, terrorism, illicit drug use, or migration. Jessop stresses that “[t]he issue of unacknowledged conditions of action and unanticipated consequences is particularly problematic where the objects of governance are liable to change, or where the environment they are embedded in is turbulent, making strategic learning difficult” (Jessop 2016a, pp. 180–181). Being in constant change in a turbulent environment is, of course, characteristic of governance objects referred to
as wicked problems. However, there are various political strategies to de-problematize problems instead of addressing them. Based on Jessop, and Malpas and Wickham we can say that fatalism, stoicism, opportunism, and cynicism are usually standard responses to “the centrality of failure and the inevitability of completeness” (Malpas and Wickham 1995, p. 39). Jessop explicitly distinguishes irony from these responses:

Fatalism leads to inaction, stoicism rests on passive resignation in the pursuit of familiar routines, opportunism is expressed in avoiding or exploiting the consequences of failure for self-interested motives and cynicism leads to the stage management of appearances to claim success in the face of failure. Cynicism is the realm of symbolic politics, accelerated policy churning (to give the impression of doing something about intractable problems), and the ‘spin doctor’ – the realm of ‘words that work and policies that fail’. This is particularly evident in the highly mediatized world of contemporary politics. (2011, p. 118)

These responses are strategies of de-problematization, of displacing the un-owned processes of wicked problems into owned processes that can be treated as simple or complex problems. We will articulate in detail the communicative strategies of de-problematization of problems in Chapters 5 and 6 and 8 where we put forth a semiotic theory of political communication and provide methods of what we call political form analysis. In this chapter, we only briefly illustrate the notion of de-problematization, which is not discussed in governance literature through its parallel with the notion of depoliticization which is relatively widely discussed in political science in recent decades.

3.2.7 Governance as De-Problematizing (Wicked) Problems

A major strategy in addressing wicked problems has been the opposite of what we discussed in the previous subsection on trans-active governance: it is to reduce them to simple or complex problems. This would be approaching them through self-active and inter-active governance. This is the form of governance we call de-problematization.

De-problematization is part of the vocational habit of professional politicians and officials who “have a fondness for distributing cheques, unveiling plaques, and cutting ribbons” (Head 2008, p. 108). Often
appeals to budgeting, discrete outputs, development plans and so on are ready-made solutions, since politicians tend to focus on highly visible or tangible pieces of the puzzle, rather than insisting on a comprehensive approach to issues. This preference is reinforced by administrative and budgeting processes which are predisposed towards tangible outputs and the measurement of incremental changes. Political and financial accountability systems encourage the specification of discrete and finite items rather than large amorphous interlinked outputs. (Head 2008, p. 107)

In governance terms, what would “de-problematization” amount to? The notion basically captures the strategies (whether conscious or not) of taking the problematic nature of the definition of wicked governance problems and their solution off the agenda. For explicating this, we have to briefly discuss the topic of depoliticization found in recent literature on policy/political analysis.

One of the crucial features of depoliticization of particular issues or problems is removing them from the realm of contingency and deliberation into a realm of necessity and fatalism. Based on various treatments of the topic, Jenkins provides a list of keywords indicating depoliticization of issues: “‘finitude’, ‘inevitability’, ‘unalterability’, ‘end’, ‘fixity’, ‘necessity’, ‘destiny’, ‘predetermination’ and ‘resignation’” (2011, p. 159). In our terms, it would be constructing a ready-made solution to an undefined problem by “succumbing to the presentation of our everyday lives in terms of a predetermined, necessary or taken-for-granted fate, rather than allowing ourselves the capacity to make choices and perhaps enact change” (ibid.). Of course, politicization, the reverse of depoliticization of an issue would be presenting it as “the subject of deliberation, decision-making and human agency where previously they were not” (Hay 2007, p. 81). It is important to stress that “[t]o engage in a strategy of depoliticization is also to perform a political act, as it generates the restriction, removal or suppression of our capacities for autonomy, as well as the preservation of a particular strategy or force” (Jenkins 2011, p. 160). Therefore, paradoxically, depoliticization is part of politics as we know it.

In his Why We Hate Politics? Colin Hay (2007) has provided the most extensive conceptualization of politicization and depoliticization thus far. For him, and the subsequent literature on the topic, the political is the
realm of contingency while the non-political is the realm of necessity. Basically, politicization and depoliticization can be conceptualized as moving issues (through whichever tactics—including discursive and institutional) either toward the realm of contingency or the realm of necessity. There are more than two analytical steps in Hay’s model since he distinguishes three realms within the political: “public and governmental,” “public and nongovernmental,” and “private sphere.” Consequently, three types of politicization and depoliticization can be conceptualized based on these distinctions:

- **Politicization 1**: promotion from the realm of necessity to the private sphere.
- **Politicization 2**: promotion from the private to the public sphere.
- **Politicization 3**: promotion from the public to the governmental sphere.

... 

- **Depoliticization 1**: demotion from the governmental to the public sphere.
- **Depoliticization 2**: demotion from the public to the private sphere.
- **Depoliticization 3**: demotion from the private sphere to the realm of necessity (Hay 2007, pp. 79–80).

Of course, the types do not form a linear sequence: for instance, in order to move an issue from governmental public sphere to the realm of the non-political, it does not have to take the intermediate steps (non-governmental public sphere, private sphere) but can be taken there immediately (and also vice versa in case of politicization). Various mechanisms exist for politicization. Consciousness-raising activities of social movements might politicize issues of harassment, domestic violence or work-place discrimination that have been considered to be part of the non-political necessity. Political parties can attempt to move issues—such as healthcare—from the non-governmental public sphere to direct governmental (legislative) domain. Issues relegated to the private sphere—such as wage gap—might be moved to the public process of
deliberation through the contestation of the “normality” by the discriminated interest-groups who could, in turn, be supported by political parties competing for the crucial votes. And so on.

Type 1 depoliticization from the governmental public sphere to non-governmental public sphere “may take one of two general forms: the displacement of responsibility from governmental to public or quasi-public authorities and the off-loading of areas of formal political responsibility to the market (through privatization)” (Hay 2007, p. 82). When it comes to the former, the “potential advantages of this to government are considerable – in that responsibility for contentious issues can now effectively be passed to public or quasi-public bodies and to officials who can present them as purely technical matters” (Hay 2007, p. 83) This is, in essence, a continuation of business as usual—but without the direct responsibilities, which are displaced to other (societal) bodies: “Politicians are thus insulated from having to answer for the consequences of policies that may continue unchanged and for which they would previously have both claimed and borne responsibility” (ibid.). When it comes to off-loading political responsibility to the market it is in essence “not a disavowal of responsibility for policy, but a rejection of the very need for policy, and hence public deliberation, in the first place” (ibid.).

Type 2 depoliticization of issues from non-governmental public sphere to the private domain is making them “matters for domestic deliberation or consumer choice” (Hay 2007, p. 85). For instance: “the representation of the issue of environmental degradation in such a way that responsibility is seen to lie neither with government nor with business, but with the consumer is, if successful, a form of depoliticization of type 2” (ibid.).

Finally, type 3 depoliticization: “transfer of responsibility from the realm of deliberation (the ‘political’ realm) to that of necessity and fate (the ‘non-political’ realm) … involves a disavowal of the capacity for deliberation, decision making and human agency” (Hay 2007, p. 86). Various forms of fatalism—either apocalyptic or optimistic—about climate change can serve as examples here:

They, too, deny the possibility of politics, suggesting that the point beyond which human intervention can no longer prevent the slide to environmental catastrophe has now been reached. Such fatalism need not be pessimistic, however. Equally depoliticizing is perhaps the most optimistic view of the process of environmental degradation. This suggests either that the slide to environmental catastrophe will be averted by the planet’s
capacity for self-correction (the mechanism, of course, remaining unspecified) or that (again in some unspecified manner) our unbounded capacity for scientific and technological innovation will avert, presumably just in time, global environmental meltdown. Again, whether these prove to be accurate predictions or merely comforting delusions, they are deeply depoliticizing. (Hay 2007, p. 87)

This very brief and non-detailed excursus to the notion of depoliticization was meant to bring to the fore the general logic that is important for conceptualizing de-problematization of (wicked) problems of governance: similarly to depoliticization, de-problematization involves removing or displacing contingency and with that also responsibility from problem definitions and their solutions. While the notion of depoliticization relies on spatial metaphor—displacement of issues from one sphere/realm to another—de-problematization involves temporal metaphor—reducing processes through postulating an instigator of it or reifying it into some sequence of discrete elements that can be considered separately (see Chapter 2 for different approaches to social processes). Given that de-problematization relies on spatial metaphor, it is not related to a defined locus of society: de-problematization can take place in any sphere of society—governmental and non-governmental public sphere, the private sector, and even realm of necessity in Hay’s sense.

In Chapter 6, we distinguish various forms of de-problematization from the viewpoint of public communication and meaning-making as we outline our categories of political semiotics. Here we conclude by pointing to several recent developments in theories of policymaking that have taken the turn to see the discursive, cultural or argumentative process as constitutive of governance.

### 3.2.8 Governance as Discourse, Culture, and Argumentation

In their discussion of the “argumentative turn” in policy analysis (see Fischer and Forester 1993; Fischer and Gottweis 2012a). Fischer and Gottweis point to the importance of focusing on communication and argumentation in our contemporary world:

These concerns take on special significance in today’s increasingly turbulent world. In all of these areas, traditional approaches – often technocratic – have proven inadequate or have failed. Indeed, for such messy
policy problems, science and scientific knowledge have often compounded problem solving, becoming themselves sources of uncertainty and ambiguity. (2012b, p. 3)

The reason for that in their view is that

policy analysis can no longer afford to limit itself to the simplified academic models of explanation. Such methods fail to address the nonlinear nature of today’s messy policy problems. They fail to capture the typically heterogeneous, interconnected, often contradictory, and increasingly globalized character of these issues. Many of these problems are, as such, appropriately described as “wicked problems.” In these situations, not only is the problem wanting for a solution, the very nature and conceptualization of the problem is not well understood. Effective solutions to such problems require ongoing, informed deliberation involving competing perspectives on the part of both government official and public citizens. (ibid., p. 6)

Similarly, in a more generalist perspective for what they call “epistemic governance,” Alasuutari and Qadir propose that whichever governance relies on “epistemic work” such as defining the “ontology of the environment”; “actors and their identifications” and “norms and values” (2019, ch. 2; see also Alasuutari and Qadir 2014). The key to governance is, in other words, knowledge production in terms of investigating the widespread public views of reality. Governance for Alasuutari and Qadir is constituted essentially through discursive processes, and in their studies, they focus on how governing agents such as parliamentarians, NGO-s or social movement engage in epistemic work of defining and relying on people’s conceptions of what is possible, rational, and desirable (Alasuutari and Qadir 2019).

Finally, we point to a development in public administration that sees Mary Douglas’s and Aaron Wildavsky’s cultural theory (1982) as an important framework for making sense of policy process and governance in terms of different forms of policy and political cultures organized in terms of different mixtures of hierarchical, egalitarian, individualist, and fatalist tendencies in decision-making and communication (see Swedlow 2002, 2011). This form of policy analysis focuses on the values and beliefs of actors and the organizational context of potential policy solutions to problems that will be implemented and enacted. The underlying cultural theory is used to evaluate the likelihood of encountering certain beliefs, values, organizational settings, the emergence of certain policy problems,
and the feasibility of various solutions to them. Among other things, this cultural theory has inspired various versions of addressing “wicked problems” through so-called clumsy solutions which would be a creative combination of different forms of decision-making cultures (individualist, egalitarian, hierarchical, fatalist) unlike “elegant solutions” in which there would be an overwhelming dominance on one form of decision-making (see Verweij and Thompson 2006).

Thus, in the conceptualization of governance, we have tendencies to see this phenomenon in terms of meaning-making, argumentation and culture. The same holds for democracy, which can also be analyzed in terms of self-actional, inter-actional, and trans-actional perspectives.

### 3.3 Substantialism and Relationalism in the Study of Democracy

One of the common research strategies in comparative politics is to compare a large number of countries along with a small set of variables. This has proven influential in the study of democracy too. Przeworski et al. (2000) have analyzed the influence of regime type to its economic performance. They define certain concepts in a minimalist fashion for providing criteria of classification of different countries. This enables them to compare 141 countries between 1950 and 1990 (or since the independence of the country to 1990). They find out that although the transition to democracy might take place in both rich and poor countries, the likelihood that democracy will remain intact is more likely, the higher the per capita income is in a given country. And vice versa: poor countries might enter a transition to democracy, but it is less likely that they are able to maintain their democratic electoral system over time. Moreover, regimes that consolidate a democratic electoral system tend to generate more wealth. Poverty leads to dictatorship.

Underlying this research is a specific understanding of democracy where the latter is defined as a regime where those who govern are elected through contested elections. (Przeworski et al. 2000, p. 15). This kind of definition enables the authors to operationalize democracy as follows: it is a regime where the holders of legislative and executive power must be elected and reelected in a multiparty system in which the changes in the cabinet through elections are observable (Przeworski et al. 2000, p. 16).

Although it is quite clear that such a formal definition is a very limited one when it comes to democratic practice, it has several important advantages nevertheless. It makes measuring democracy relatively easy and in
turn comparing a large number of countries feasible. It can also shed some light on how regime type affects economic performance. However, is it democracy that is measured there? Wouldn’t Przeworski et al. have been more accurate in saying that they are not really studying democracy, but, instead, contested elections? What is democracy for that matter? We argue that various conceptualizations of democracy too fall under the categorization of self-action, inter-action, and trans-action.

3.3.1 Self-Actionalism and the Study of Democracy

Przeworski et al. (2000) is an example of a self-actionalist approach to democracy: one structure—the existence of contested elections—is presumed to do the trick of democracy. These kinds of models leave aside the everyday (political) activities that form the practice of democracy. Generally, we could distinguish at least three self-actional strategies of defining democracy in which the existence of certain structures is presumed to determine whether a setting (usually a regime) is to be counted as democracy. One of the oldest approach, leading back to at least Aristotle, is to see the constitution as the self-acting structure of democracy: “A constitutional approach concentrates on laws a regime enacts concerning political activity. Thus we can look across history and recognize differences among oligarchies, monarchies, republics, and a number of other types by means of contrasting legal arrangements” (Tilly 2007, p. 7). As is well known the proclaimed constitutions can often hide starkly different political reality—one can only think of the constitution of the Stalinist period in the Soviet Union and contrast it with its actual political situation. This is why sometimes a more substantive approach is adopted by focusing

on the conditions of life and politics a given regime promotes: Does this regime promote human welfare, individual freedom, security, equity, social equality, public deliberation, and peaceful conflict resolution? If so, we might be inclined to call it democratic regardless of how its constitution reads. (ibid.)

Here the self-acting structure is composed of certain outcomes that make a given setting democratic. This approach is haunted by questions like “What if all those outcomes are achieved through undemocratic means?” Concentrating on the latter is another self-actional approach
in democratic theory: a procedural definition of democracy: “Advocates of *procedural definitions* single out a narrow range of governmental practices to determine whether a regime qualifies as democratic. Most procedural observers center their attention on elections, asking whether genuinely competitive elections engaging large numbers of citizens regularly produce changes in governmental personnel and policy” (Tilly 2007, p. 8). Besides the already scrutinized example of Przeworski et al. (2000), various democracy indexes (e.g. Freedom House) work with procedural definitions. On the whole, whether one sees democracy as an owned process instigated by constitutions, substantive aims, or procedures, she/he is working with a self-actional model just the same that corresponds by and large to the Hobbesian self-actional understanding of power or hierarchical self-active governance.

What about approaches that take into account both the democratic character of certain outputs or goals as well as means for their achievement? These we can refer to as inter-actional models.

### 3.3.2 Inter-Actionalism and the Study of Democracy

Tilly characterizes some approaches to democracy as “process-oriented.” In effect, they are engaged in another form of process-reduction compared to self-actionalism: they reify democratic process into a checklist of criteria: “*Process-oriented approaches* to democracy differ significantly from constitutional, substantive, and procedural accounts. They identify some minimum set of processes that must be continuously in motion for a situation to qualify as democratic” (Tilly 2007, p. 9). What is noteworthy here, is that democracy is not related to some structure that is akin to a regime. Basically, what is defined, is a democratic “situation” or “moment” or more generally, “process.” Tilly cites Robert Dahl’s approach as an example. When it comes to policymaking Dahl (1998, pp. 37–38) distinguishes five criteria for a process to qualify as democratic: “effective participation,” “voting equality,” “enlightened understanding,” “control of the agenda,” and “inclusion of all adults.” Even though Dahl’s criteria for process evaluation go way beyond the structuralist self-action of constitutional, substantive, and procedural definitions, it is still dichotomous and static. Further steps can be taken to move from process-oriented approach to processual approach to democracy in the sense we distinguished in the second chapter when we discussed trans-actional approaches in general. That is why Tilly proposes the following:
We do not want merely to count the democratic house at a single point in time. Instead, we want to do two more demanding things: first, to compare regimes with regard to how democratic they are; second, to follow individual regimes through time, observing when and how they become more or less democratic. (2007, p. 10)

Tilly’s concrete proposal is that “[i]f we want insight into causes and effects of democratization or de-democratization, we have no choice but to recognize them as continuous processes rather than simple steps across a threshold in one direction or the other” (ibid.). Since Tilly sees explanation mostly in causalist (causal mechanistic) terms and proposes that “we must move from a yes-no checklist to a list of crucial variables” (ibid.), we share his general vision of democracy as a continuous process, but not his limiting it to the terrain of state/citizen relations as in his more specified notion of democracy: “a regime is democratic to the degree that political relations between the state and its citizens feature broad, equal, protected and mutually binding consultation” (2007, pp. 13–14, italics in the original). According to such a notion, it is easy to operationalize democratization and de-democratization as processes captured by the measurements of certain crucial variables: “Democratization means net movement toward broader, more equal, more protected, and more binding consultation. De-democratization, obviously, then means net movement toward narrower, more unequal, less protected, and less binding consultation” (ibid., p. 14). However, we already saw, neither power nor governance can be reduced to regional categories of state/citizen relations, which in essence is a form of inter-actionalism between structure and agency. Instead, we should view them as specific logics of communication and meaning-making in society or culture. We want to scrutinize instead how would democracy as a continuous process look like if it did not have its own specific region (government, citizens, parties), but would rather be a set of processual relations organizing a particular setting. This way, we could put forth a truly relational concept of democracy. For this, we have to move first from the idea of democracy as a set of structures or institutions, and from the idea of democracy as an inter-action between state and citizens to an idea of democracy as a meaning-making practice. Various interpretive approaches in political science have taken this step. This paves the way for entering trans-actional understanding of democracy.
3.3.3 Trans-Actionalism and the Study of Democracy

One of the promising pathways toward trans-actional understanding of democracy is to be found in the cultural approach to politics that sees culture not in terms of some “sedimented essences” of groups or certain “group traits,” but rather as “practices of meaning-making” or as “semiotic practices” (Wedeen 2002). A research direction coming from this perspective could be captured as follows: “Studying meaning-production entails analyzing the relations between agents’ practices (e.g., their work habits, gendered norms, self-policing strategies, and leisure patterns) and systems of signification (language and other symbolic systems)” (Wedeen 2002, p. 714). The notion of culture as “semiotic practices” is key to this approach to democracy.

The principal promoter of this kind of approach, Lisa Wedeen, points out that there are several significant consequences of this kind of approach (Wedeen 2004, p. 714):

1. “culture as semiotic practices refers to what language and symbols do—how they are inscribed in practices that operate to produce observable political effects.”
2. “‘semiotic practices’ is also a lens. It offers a view of political phenomena by focusing attention on how and why actors invest them with meaning.” In other words: “[w]hether one does or does not explore processes of meaning-making will depend on the particular research problem one confronts.”

Wedeen delineates the specificity of her approach as follows:

In stark contrast to grasping an inner essence, such a conceptualization of culture and of meaning requires thinking pragmatically, discovering what we know (that seeds are beings scattered or ballots are being checked and counted) and what we need to know (what work this seed scattering or ballot tallying is doing, for example), even when we have only a minimal familiarity with context and language. It then prompts us to probe deeper, to ask questions about the conditions under which specific material and semiotic activities emerge (terrorism, for example), the contexts within which they find public expression, the work they do in the world, and the irregularities they generate in the process of reproduction. (2002, p. 721; see also Wedeen 2004)
This entails not seeing democracy in terms of a regime composed of certain formal institutions, and a movement to meaning-making as the research object for analyzing democratic process or practice: “An interpretive approach that emphasizes semiotic practices allows us to shift our attention away from the minimalist, formalist notion of electoral procedures to other dimensions of what might be construed as “democratic” practice” (Wedeen 2004, p. 285). These two steps are of paramount importance for a truly relational approach to democracy. Wedeen is not, of course, alone in taking them, although she has probably moved the furthest in developing an empirical methodology consistent with these steps. There is, however, a noteworthy tradition in taking what could be called “the discursive turn” in democratic theory, which conceptualizes democracy as a “discourse” that is, a system of meaning, rather than as a checklist of formal criteria.

The discourse-theoretical approach to democracy, informing the normative ideal of deliberative democracy is probably the most widely known among the intellectual movements taking these steps. Habermas (1996, p. 26), the leading figure of this movement, explicitly criticizes both the liberal and the republican model of democratic politics for presupposing “a view of society as centered in the state – be it as guardian of market-society [liberalism] or the state as the self-conscious institutionalization of an ethical community [republicanism].” What he calls “discourse theory of democracy” or “deliberative model of politics” has a “decentered” view of society (Habermas 1996, p. 29). Formal political institutions (the parliament, the cabinet, etc.) are not the fundamental political elements of society through which the crucial features of democracy (such as popular sovereignty) work:

Discourse theory works instead with the higher-level intersubjectivity of communication processes that flow through both the parliamentary bodies and the informal networks of the public sphere. Within and outside the parliamentary complex, these subjectless forms of communication constitute arenas in which a more or less rational opinion- and will-formation can take place. (Habermas 1996, p. 28)

This non-state-centric or “discourse-theoretical” understanding of democracy started out originally with Habermas’s early discussion of the “public sphere” or “Öffentlichkeit.” For Habermas, the term has several connotations: it is
both a set of places (coffee houses and salons) where bourgeois citizens historically met to argue about literary and political matters and the substantive activity of private persons coming together as a public for the purposes of rational-critical debate; and the mediated, reflexive ways in which these critical conversations in public places referred to, and actually influenced, events and arguments appearing in print. (Wedeen 2004, p. 287)  

It is important here that we are talking about certain practices of meaning-making that are important for conceptualizing democratic “moment,” “situation,” or “process” within a historical setting in which there was no formal democracy in place at all (eighteenth-century Europe) with its usual features revolving around competitive elections. This is crucial for trans-actional approach to democracy. The feature “democratic” as attributed to specific action makes sense in a potentially infinite number of settings—whether they happen to be in a formally democratic or undemocratic regime. Wedeen (2004, 2009) provides an example of “qat chew” tradition in Yemen in the 1990s, a country which hadn’t seen any democratic developments in its formal structure for decades. Yet “qat chew conversations have flourished as a key enclave of publicity through which frank discussions among politicians and ordinary citizens continue to take place” (Wedeen 2004, p. 294). Thus, there can be even extensive or regular democratic processes in a formally non-democratic country. This makes sense from the “discursive” or “meaning-making” perspective on democracy, seeing democracy in terms of “semiotic practices.” What else can these approaches give us? Wedeen points out that in relation to democracy, they

.can explain why some political ideologies, policies, and self-policing strategies work better than others; and why particular material and status interests are taken for granted, viewed as valuable, or become available idioms for dissemination and collective action. … can help us explain the mechanisms by which political identifications with particular forms of government get established, shift, or lose their importance. They can show how rhetoric and symbols, such as campaign advertisements, political speeches, and iconography, not only exemplify but also produce political support, or simply compliance... (Wedeen 2004, p. 285, italics added)
For the moment we leave aside here the exact meaning of the word “explain” that we highlighted in the previous quote, and come back to it explicitly in Chapter 7 when we outline the distinction between causal and constitutive explanation of social processes, and view the latter as characteristic of relational approaches (including semiotics). At the moment, however, we highlight the fact that decentering the notion of democracy—untying it from certain “loci” of society or state—is essential for moving toward a trans-actional understanding of democracy. Habermas’s “discourse theory of democracy” started this movement, but the normative model of “deliberative democracy” that has evolved from this notion has also been considered to be too “exclusive” or too “centered” by various theorists of democracy. The issue here is that the Habermasian school tends to see the “discourse” with which democratic communication is associated as too restrictive and too closed.

What these critics have in mind could be illustrated through explicating in more detail the normative constraints that deliberative democracy sets on “political public sphere” or, in other words, the democratic discourse. One of the oft-cited expositions of those constraints that the model of deliberative democracy sets on democratic discourse comes from Joshua Cohen (2005). At the core of it is an understanding of democratic association in which justification of positions concerning general interest is taking place through the debate and deliberation among free and equal citizens. How to imagine this? Cohen distinguishes two aspects of deliberative democracy: “the formal model of democracy” and “the ideal of deliberative procedure.” In case of the former, he highlights: (a) that according to this model democracy is an independent developing association; (b) that for members of this association the source of legitimacy is their free and equal deliberation; (c) that the model is pluralist, i.e., the parties have different preferences and goals; (d) that the results of the deliberation among parties must be visible (public); and (e) that the parties mutually acknowledge each other as partners capable of deliberation.

Cohen opens the second part of the model, “the ideal of deliberative procedure” as follows: (1) the procedure is free in the sense that the parties involved are only tied by the results of their deliberation, and they presume that the ground for abiding whichever decisions are sufficient only if it is a result of their deliberation; (2) it is reasoned, i.e., only the “force of a better argument” counts in it; (3) the parties are equal both
formally—everyone capable of deliberation is welcome to participate—as well as substantially—no distribution of power affects the results of deliberation and gives anyone advantages; and (4) ideally the deliberation should reach a *consensus* (Cohen 2005, pp. 346–348).

This ideal of deliberative procedure (backed with a formal concept of democracy) forms the basis of democratic discourse or the “political public sphere” in deliberative democracy or “discourse theory of democracy.” “Discourse” here is basically equated with “deliberation” and “democratic discourse” with deliberation between *free, equal* and *reasoned* parties aiming for *consensus*. This has provoked criticism from various agonistic or radical democratic thinkers who see this kind of understanding of democracy too limited. Why should only critical arguments be part of democratic discourse and not, for instance, “greeting,” “rhetoric,” and “storytelling” (Young 1996; Benhabib 1996, p. 7)? Why not go to the end with decentering the notion of democracy? This is proposed for instance by one of the leading historians of political thought, Sheldon Wolin: “democracy needs to be reconceived as something other than a form of government: as a *mode of being* that is conditioned by bitter experience, doomed to succeed only temporarily, but is a recurrent possibility as long as the memory of the political survives” (Wolin 1996, p. 43, italics added).

This conceptualization of democracy as a “mode of being” lies at the foundation of the political theory that critically engage with post-structuralist social ontology, most notably the so-called Essex school (Laclau, Mouffe, and others) to which we turn to in the next section of this chapter. Important to note here, however, is that the idea of democracy as a mode of being rather than a certain form of rule or even a certain form of deliberation, comes for the Essex school from the understanding that the very idea of democracy is based on the acknowledgment of the *contingency* of whichever social relations. Claude Lefort has made it most explicit:

democracy is instituted and sustained by the *dissolution of the markers of certainty*. It inaugurates a history in which people experience a fundamental indeterminacy as to the basis of power, law and knowledge, and so as to the basis of relations between *self* and *other*, at every level of social life. (Lefort 1988, p. 19)
However, as is already pointed out by Chantal Mouffe, the contingency of the social or the “dissolution of the markers of certainty” in Lefort’s sense is a necessary condition for democracy, but not yet sufficient. Democracy would be unthinkable, yes, if social positions and social relations more generally were grounded on some “natural” foundations—as they have been presumed throughout most of the history of human civilization when there has been a hierarchical society based on some (usually religious) understanding of “natural” order of things. However, the uncertainty and contingency of social relations or the “empty place of power” that democracy introduces might as well bring about social order that is inimical to democracy, when this “empty place” is filled with totalitarian or populist forces that purport to embody “the will of the people”—a development all too familiar in the twentieth-century politics. That is why Mouffe warns us:

> instead of simply identifying the modern form of democracy with the empty place of power, I would also want to put emphasis on the distinction between two aspects: on one side, democracy as a form of rule, that is, the principle of sovereignty of the people; and on the other side, the symbolic framework within which this democratic rule is exercised. The novelty of modern democracy, what makes it properly ‘modern’, is that, with the advent of the ‘democratic revolution’, the old democratic principle that ‘power should be exercised by the people’ emerges again, but this time within a symbolic framework informed by the liberal discourse, with its strong emphasis on the value of individual liberties and human rights. (Mouffe 2000, p. 2)

What Mouffe basically argues here is that we should not forget the form of rule historically characteristic of democracy that revolves around the sovereignty of the people. However, there are different symbolic frameworks within which this sovereignty can be articulated, not all of them necessarily democratic or modern democratic capable of embracing the ideas and practices of liberties and human rights. In fact, the second great representative of the Essex school besides Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, has even established the general tendencies that the democratic discourse (or the symbolic framework) has taken throughout its modern history (drawing, of course, on their earlier joint work, e.g., Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 1987):
I see the history of democracy as divided by one fundamental cleavage. On the one hand, we have democracy as the attempt to construct the people as ‘one’, a homogeneous social actor opposed either to “power” or to an external enemy – or to a combination of both. This is the Jacobin conception of democracy, with its concomitant ideal of a transparent community unified – if necessary – by terror. This is the tradition that runs, with very analogous structural features, from Robespierre to Pol Pot. The discourses around which this democratic ideal is constructed are, obviously, predominantly metaphorical – although they cannot conceal their metonymic foundations. On the other hand, we have democracy as respect of difference, as shown, for instance, in multiculturalism or in the new pluralism associated with contemporary social movements. Here we have discourses that are predominantly metonymic, for although – given the impossibility of a pure differential, nontropological closure – some effect of metaphoric aggregation is inevitable, it will be an aggregation that always keeps the traces of its own contingency and incompleteness visible. Within this basic polarity there are, obviously, all kinds of possible intermediate combinations that we can start exploring through the variety of tropoi to be found in classical rhetoric. (Laclau 2001b, p. 250, italics added)

The appeal to general tropes of democratic discourse—metaphor and metonymy—is crucial for making sense of Laclau and Mouffe’s idea of democracy and the political. Basically, they argue that there is an inherent tension in every democratic discourse: a pull toward presenting society (or “the people”) as a unified whole with singular voice—a tendency characteristic of various populist political discourses—or a tendency to present society as full of diversities and different voices—as in various forms of pluralism. The former pull is overwhelmingly metaphorical in its strategy and tactics, the latter metonymic:

Metaphor grounds its work in analogical relations; in that sense it tends to essentialize the link between the terms of the analogy... Metonymy, on the contrary, is grounded in mere relations of contiguity; in that sense, the contingent character of the tropological displacement it initiates becomes fully visible. Democracy is suspended in an undecidable game between metaphor and metonymy: each of the competing forces in the democratic game tends to make as permanent as possible the occupation of the empty place of power; but if there was no simultaneous assertion of the contingent character of this occupation, there would be no democracy. (Laclau 2001a, p. 8, italics added)
But what grounds Laclau and Mouffe to put forth this kind of understanding of democracy as a discourse between tendencies toward metaphoric and metonymic articulation? A quick answer is that they see every articulation of discourse as essentially a hegemonic articulation, and metaphoric and metonymic just refer to different forms of hegemony. In addition, in their usage the notions of “discursive” and “social” are co-terminus: the articulation of discourse is the articulation of social relations. Therefore, they do not see “discourse” as some sort of regional category reduced to merely text and talk, but as synonymous with systems of meaning that constitute (social) action. Thus, the “linguistic” categories of metaphor and metonymy are also to be understood as general logics of the social, not just figures of speech or writing. Somewhat exaggeratedly we can speak of metaphorical or metonymical societies, social formations, social action and acts, not just metaphorical expressions or works of art, poetry, or speech. We will specify this in detail in Chapters 5 and 6, where we put forth our theory of political semiotics emerging from this insight. But here it is crucial to go into more detail with Laclau and Mouffe’s notion of hegemony. It is the foundational concept in their political thought that is in the intersection of the three key concepts discussed in this chapter: power, governance, and democracy. In fact, what we argue in the chapters to come is that power, governance, and democracy can all be analyzed along the same metaphor/metonymy axis as it was proposed by Laclau and Mouffe for making sense of democracy.

### 3.4 Hegemony in the Intersection of Power, Governance, and Democracy in the Essex School of Political Analysis

As Mouffe explains, the most crucial concept pertinent to the problem of the political for her, is, besides antagonism, the category of hegemony (Mouffe 2005, p. 17). The latter is what underlies the “ethos of contingency” in Laclau and Mouffe’s work (see Selg 2012 and below). In their framework, “hegemonic” and “contingent” are features that mutually presuppose each other. Hegemony, first, is a form of power or governance of the social:

Its very condition is that a particular social force assumes the representation of a totality that is radically incommensurable with it. Such a form of “hegemonic universality” is the only one that a political community
can reach. From this point of view, our analysis should be differentiated from analyses in which universality finds in the social field a direct, non-hegemonically mediated expression, and those in which particularities are merely added up without any mediation between them being thinkable – as in some forms of post-modernism. But if a relation of hegemonic representation is to be possible, its ontological status has to be defined. This is the point at which, for our analysis, a notion of the social conceived as a discursive space – that is, making possible relations of representation strictly unthinkable within a physicalist or naturalistic paradigm – becomes of paramount importance. (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. x)

In this discursive space, hegemonic relation means that a particular force (say Führer or Solidarność) represents a totality that is radically incommensurable with it (e.g., the will of the German people or the will of the Polish people). This particular force then functions as a “hegemonic universal.” From such a definition, it is quite evident that the identity of whichever social force needs to be presumed contingent and relational, not fixed to certain pre-given substantial content. Otherwise, such reorganisation (“articulation” in Laclau/Mouffe’s vocabulary)—where a particular can function as a universal—would be unthinkable. “In order to have hegemony, the requirement is that elements whose own nature does not predetermine them to enter into one type of arrangement rather than another, nevertheless coalesce, as a result of an external or articulating practice” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. xii). Therefore, hegemony presumes the contingency of all social relations.

This is, a position in social theory, although thoroughly grounded in post-structuralist ontology (see Laclau and Mouffe 2001, ch. 3; Laclau 2005, esp. chs. 4–5). In itself, this might not be of much help in normative debates around governance or democratic governance in particular. But when it comes to the latter, we can point out that behind this social ontology lies none other than the very idea of democracy—and the latter has clear normative meaning. Laclau and Mouffe point out that the increasing visibility of the contingency of social relations is not universal or transhistorical change, but a democratic development in both governance of society or mode of being more generally. Laclau puts the idea succinctly: “I see democracy as a type of regime which makes fully visible the contingent character of the hegemonic link” (2001a, p. 5). In other words, even though all societies presume hegemonic relations that—no matter how positive or productive—are always to a certain extent exclusionary, democracy retains procedural means (through institutions like
protection of free speech and political contestation, checks and balances, even free and regular elections—although the latter should in no way be seen as defining features), and semiotic practices (open discourses and public communication) for keeping the contingency of any given power constellation or hegemonic link at the very center of political attention.

What tends to be forgotten is that Laclau and Mouffe’s original pursuit for a suitably articulated notion of hegemony in the Marxist tradition (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, chs. 1–2) is motivated by the avoidance of the “totalitarian” or “antidemocratic” tendencies characteristic of this tradition, especially when it comes to the usage of the same notion in the Bolshevist language (Lenin, Trotsky). In the latter, “hegemony” as a form of power and rule had obvious “closing” connotations, and in political practice it meant “ontological anchoring of the Party into the role of vanguard force that incarnated the ‘real interests’ of the working class and the epistemological privileging of Marxism as an objective science of the ‘essence’ and necessary laws of History” (Selg 2012, p. 89; Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. 57). Laclau and Mouffe contrast such totalitarian idea of hegemony with the Gramscian and inherently more “democratic” idea of “hegemony as articulation” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. 65). The totalitarian version tends to hide the contingency of the hegemonic links constitutive of socio-political order and present existing power relations as “natural” or “historically necessary.” But even Gramsci’s notion of hegemony as governance of the social in terms of “moral and intellectual leadership” remains somewhat restricted for a fully democratic practice of hegemony. Although Gramsci’s position moved the farthest among the Marxist tradition in recognizing the fact of contingency of all social relations, he still presumes the essentialist notion of “fundamental class” and therefore contingency plays a limited role in his notion of hegemony which would, in turn, be not fully fit for “a democratic age” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, pp. 67–69).

Power and governance of social order—in other words, politics in its fundamental sense—has taken the form of hegemony as contingent articulation ever increasingly within the framework of socio-political reality that Laclau and Mouffe call “the democratic revolution,” a figure whose origins lead back to Alexis de Tocqueville. “Democratic revolution” for Laclau and Mouffe is a significant transformation in the constitution of social relations, emerging from the French Revolution in the eighteenth century: “This break with the ancien régime...would provide the discursive conditions which made it possible to propose the different forms of
inequality as illegitimate and anti-natural, and thus make them equivalent as forms of oppression” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. 155). Put differently: “democratic revolution” denotes those socio-political developments that have gradually transformed Western civilization from a hierarchical society that views inequalities as “natural” to a form of society that increasingly views inequalities as “unnatural” and historical and contingent hegemonic articulations—in other words as results of power relations. This revolution according to Laclau and Mouffe is a continuous process that is still ongoing, spreading the idea of “equality” to ever new spheres of the social starting with the “anti-capitalist struggles during the nineteenth century” to constantly growing “new social movements” since the 1960s to 1980s (see Laclau and Mouffe 1987, pp. 104–105), a phenomenon that keeps growing and spreading the idea of equality to spheres (such as the Internet) that were not politically relevant at the time Laclau and Mouffe wrote their classical works.

Consequently, we can highlight that presuming contingency of the social in their theory of power and governance in terms of hegemony is not merely analytic (ontological) disposition for Laclau and Mouffe. This is also a certain normative ethos—which we can call, following one of the authors of this book (Selg 2012) the ethos of contingency—which informs their normative political proposals, the latter being framed in terms of “the project of radical democracy” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, ch. 4) and “agonistic pluralism” (Mouffe 2000, 2005).

“The ethos of contingency” can be defined as follows: “each participant in a social order should view both that order as a whole and everybody’s position within it as contingent and not natural or fixed” (Selg 2012, p. 84). This is of course, what is tacitly or less tacitly presumed in all of Laclau and Mouffe’s work since their Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. In the latter, they make explicit what the project of radical democracy is—which is, recall, based on their general theory of hegemony and organic relations between power, governance, and democracy implied in the notion of hegemony. Radical democracy is envisioned “in a form of politics which is founded not upon dogmatic postulation of any ‘essence of the social’, but, on the contrary, on affirmation of the contingency and ambiguity of every ‘essence’” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. 193). Here, the ethos of contingency looms large. Later on, Mouffe articulates this politico-practical proposal in the form of “agonistic pluralism”: this is essentially a form of governance that entails setting a consensus about the fundamental values of liberty and equality in a liberal-democratic society.
in a manner that their interpretation is left entirely open and subject to contestation, since “the drawing of the frontier between the legitimate and the illegitimate [interpretation of the fundamental values] is always a political decision, and ... it should therefore always remain open to contestation” (Mouffe 2005, p. 121, italics added). The reason for this is, again related to hegemony: “Consensus in a liberal-democratic society is – and will always be – the expression of a hegemony and the crystallization of power relations” (Mouffe 2000, p. 49). In other words: each consensus is always contingent and denying this would be incompatible with the very idea of democracy. The ethos of contingency helps us also explain what is at stake in Mouffe’s famous distinction between “enemies” and “adversaries.” As is well known, since the early 1990s (starting with Mouffe 1993; see also Mouffe 2000, 2005, 2013) Mouffe has argued that one of the political tasks for agonistic pluralism is always the need to provide liberal-democracy with institutions that turn antagonism into agonism and at the same time enemies into adversaries. For making these distinctions, she takes recourse to Carl Schmitt’s notion of the political (Schmitt 1996) which delineates the specificity of the political in terms of the capacity to draw a real distinction between friends and enemies. In other words, Schmitt sees the political in terms of antagonism—the opposites in this relation between enemies see each other as being in an illegitimate position.

Mouffe’s idea is that in a liberal-democratic society—which Schmitt basically saw as a form of political-practical and also theoretical failure—the idea is actually not to erase conflict from the political scenery and tie politics to ethics or deliberation but to turn antagonistic conflict between enemies into an agonistic one between adversaries who disagree with each other and are ready to defend their position, but at the same time acknowledge each other’s position as legitimate. In our terms, enemies do not share the ethos of contingency, but adversaries do. They do acknowledge that the changing of social positions—their turn around, their redistribution, reconstitution, and contestation—are “real possibilities” in their society. And underlying this normative ethos shared by adversaries is the understanding of power and governance in terms of hegemony as contingent articulation. It is in this fundamental sense that in Laclau and Mouffe’s oeuvre notions of power, governance, and democracy not only belong together—they, in fact, mutually presuppose each other, and can be analyzed as different dimensions of hegemonic relations.
3.5 Taking Stock: What Is Political in Relational Political Analysis?

In this chapter, we have been engaged in meta-theoretical reflection on three crucial categories of political analysis: power, governance, and democracy, which define for us the core of the political. In our analysis of all of them, we moved from substantialist conceptions to relational ones, which in turn entailed seeing them as certain logics of meaning-making through constitutive relations of trans-action rather than causal relations of self-action and inter-action. Consequently, we moved from process-oriented approaches, that reduce power, governance, or democracy to certain instigators or variables, to processual approaches theorizing them as un-owned processes whose constituent elements can be considered separately, but not as being separate. The notion of hegemony which we considered as a general terrain for the political in our approach can be analyzed in its dimensions of power, governance, and democracy. We move to concrete research methods in Chapter 8 after we have outlined political semiotics as a concrete theory of hegemony in Chapters 5 and 6, based on the Essex school’s discourse-theoretical notion of the political and cultural semiotics of the Tartu-Moscow School. By way of concluding this chapter, we point out that our approach is in tune with various treatments of the political in processual-relational terms found in political theory and analysis (although often not using the same terminology).

According to Leftwich, the most important factor influencing how theorists conceive politics is “whether they define it primarily in terms of a process, or whether they define it in terms of the place or places where it happens, that is in terms of an arena or institutional forum” (2004, p. 13). The latter strategy of defining the political is exemplified by different currents of self- and inter-actionalism such as Marxist and liberalist political theory as well as behaviorist political science and the classical paradigm of political sociology. This book mostly (but not exclusively, see below) adopts the former strategy, since our view of the political is strictly speaking Laclauian (or Gramscian for that matter). When Laclau and Mouffe speak of political struggles, they specify that they “do not do so in the restricted sense of demands which are situated at the level of parties and of the State. What we are referring to is a type of action whose objective is the transformation of a social relation which constructs a subject in a relationship of subordination” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 153; see also Laclau 1990, p. 172; Laclau and Zac 1994, p. 4; Marchart
Of course, the most eminent non-topographical or non-arena definition of the political comes from Carl Schmitt for whom the political concerns conflict and antagonism and the distinction between friend and enemy—which can occur in any site of the social (Schmitt 1996, pp. 26–27). The Schmittian point of departure informs the theorization of the political for Chantal Mouffe who distinguishes between “politics” in the form of hegemonic articulation of social order and “the political” referring to “dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations” (Mouffe 2000, p. 101). For her, both “the political” and “politics” mutually presuppose each other: there cannot be hegemonic articulation (politics) without the presence of some antagonism (the political); and contrary to classical Marxist position, no antagonism is “naturally” given but is always partly constructed by some hegemonic force.

In the most general sense, “the political” and “politics” in this book are addressed in terms of the articulation of meanings (the details of which are mostly discussed in the next chapters) and hence it is not meant as a topographical or an arena-related category. The most direct background informing Laclau/Mouffe’s meaning-centered and process-oriented understanding of “the political” comes from their Gramscian roots. There tends to be a general agreement that for Gramsci (1971) hegemony is not a regional category at least in the sense that the basis of the consensus that is required for its operation derives from shared meanings (see Fontana 1993, 2006). And this, as argued by Haugaard, is the insight developed in Laclau and Mouffe’s more conflict-oriented and discourse-theoretical notion of hegemony:

The consensus, which Gramsci observes is central to hegemony, is a consensus upon meaning. The exclusions which Laclau and Mouffe write about are the excluded meanings that have the potential to destabilize a particular set of relations of domination. Since meaning is essentially arbitrary it is possible to construct reality, hence relations of domination, differently. (Haugaard 2006, p. 54)

Thus, the underlying notion of “the political” for this book is a non-topographical and related to meaning-articulations. We should, however, add a qualification here. Namely, the “arena” aspect cannot be dismissed entirely from the definition of the political, but rather we should speak
of the primacy of process over arena. The problem with completely non-arena definitions of the political is that they tend to be pretty idiosyncratic and ignore the fact that words do not have meanings in isolation but in a system or language game. As to that language game, we take our lead from Wolin who points out that “the words “public,” “common,” and “general” have a long tradition of usage which has made them synonyms for what is political” (Wolin 2004, p. 10). Thus “[f]rom its very beginnings in Greece, the Western political tradition has looked upon the political order as a common order created to deal with those concerns in which all of the members of society have some interest” (ibid.). Especially pertinent member of the “political language game” for the current book is the “public.” As Wolin points out: “one of the essential qualities of what is political, and one that has powerfully shaped the view of political theorists about their subject-matter, is its relationship to what is “public” (Wolin 2004, p. 4). And the notion of “public” has several “arena”-related connotations, and hence some remnants of “arena” in the definition of “the political” are unavoidable even from the post-structuralist point of view. This is exemplified for instance by Glynos and Howarth (the direct students of Laclau) who, adopting a generally processual view of the political, nevertheless add that “[t]he concept of public is helpful – perhaps essential – in enabling us to distinguish between social and political practices, in which the latter are defined as having a distinctively public import” (Glynos and Howarth 2007, p. 115). Similarly, with respect to the methods of analyzing hegemony in the dimensions of power, governance, and democracy developed in the next chapters the stress on public communication should not be overlooked, since otherwise we could end up with absurd results.

Notes

1. Metagovernance is a widely used concept in recent decades (see Meuleman 2008, 2013a; Sørensen and Torfing 2007c, 2009, 2017; Sørensen 2006; Kooiman 2003; Kooiman and Jentoft 2009; Wilson et al. 2017). We focus here mainly on Jessop’s contribution not only because he was one of the pioneers in bringing this notion into the discussion, but also because his break with “tools talk” is most radical and in our view most consistent with the notion of trans-active governance we are proposing here. We also skip Jessop’s discussion of metagovernance in the wider sense which he partly theorizes through Dunsire’s (1993) notion of “collibration.” A general theory of trans-active governance would have to take this aspect into account, but the current chapter tries to introduce the very notion
into the discussion of governance rather than fully articulate it—a task that would make the chapter excessively long and overdimensionalized. Hence, we leave it for future research.

2. Cf. this to Laclau’s later statement: “A free society is not one where a social order has been established that is better adapted to human nature, but one which is more aware of the contingency and historicity of any order” (Laclau 1990, p. 211).

**References**


4.1 A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO THE POLITICAL?

Having established in the previous chapter that from the relational perspective studying the political as hegemony—through the analytical, conceptual triangle of power, governance, and democracy—is first and foremost a study of meaning-making process, one cannot help but wonder why there is such a neglect of semiotic approaches in political analysis or arguably in the social sciences more generally. Emerging in the nineteenth century United States from the works of Charles Peirce and in Europe with the works of Ferdinand de Saussure, semiotics has been one of the earliest disciplines in the human sciences that have explicitly defined its approach to meaning in relational terms. The crucial category for semiotics—the sign—would not make much sense in non-relational terms. Both Saussurean and Peircean notions of sign presume it to be a relation rather than an entity. In Saussure, the meaning of a sign is conceived as emerging out of intrasystemic differences of language. For Peirce, a sign also presumes a relationship with object and interpretant that is, in turn, in a relationship with the ground as a context. One way of explaining this lack of deployment of semiotics in political analysis is, of course, that political science, public administration, international relations, and political theory still lack a “relational turn” (see Selg 2016). This is, however, only part of the story. Let us put forth a more provocative twist, by looking at Hegemony and Socialist Strategy by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), a book

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P. Selg and A. Ventsel, Introducing Relational Political Analysis, Palgrave Studies in Relational Sociology, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-48780-5_4
that in many ways initiated a “relational turn” in political analysis already 35 years ago, without, however using this vocabulary explicitly.

As we already saw in the brief exposition in the previous chapter, the central category, hegemony, is thoroughly relational in the transactionalist sense we have discussed in the previous chapters. Looking at the book’s theoretical edifice—comprising around 20 different concepts that in the course of the subsequent elaborations of both authors are reduced to around 5–6—one cannot help but think that this is a work on a *semiotic* approach to society and politics. All sorts of theoretical tools indicate that an essentially *semiotic* move is made for conceptualizing politics: the Saussurean view that each meaning-system is a system of differences, the view that this system has to be created through constructing “nodal points” (“empty signifiers” in Laclau’s later vocabulary) that *articulate* them by making the differences at least partly equivalent to each other; we have “logic of difference” operating in the process of signification that corresponds to Saussurean syntagmatic pole of language, and logic of equivalence that is located to the Saussurean paradigmatic pole, and so on. Thus, the most eminent theorist of power among those who explicitly view Laclau and Mouffe as their direct influence, Stewart Clegg, characterizes the type of analysis stemming from this work as “a semiotics of power” (Clegg 1997 [1989], p. 183). As he explains, for Laclau and Mouffe “[p]ower is neither ethical [Lukes] nor micropolitical [Foucault]: above all it is textual, semiotic, and inherent in the very possibility of textuality, meaning and signification in the social world” (ibid., p. 184). For Clegg, it seems to be such an elementary conclusion from Laclau and Mouffe’s work that he does not even feel the need to elaborate this “semiotics of power” or even comment the curious fact that there is no mentioning of semiotics whatsoever in Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and that instead, we have mainly a recourse to post-structuralism. Yet we would argue (with affinities to Clegg) that there is, in fact, semiotics all over the place in their work—but this semiotics is left untheorized. In fact, one of the central terms associated with Laclau, as we elaborate later—the “empty signifier”—was coined by a leading figure of semiotics, Roland Barthes already in 1957.1

Why is there such ignoring of semiotics in Laclau and Mouffe’s work? For the sake of provocation, we will entertain the argument that this ignoring is not a result of ignorance, but, instead a *strategic* move. What we have in mind is inspired by developments in the sociology of ideas that draw substantial parallels between social movements and
scientific/intellectual movements. For instance, Frickel and Gross (2005) argue that among other things it is, on the one hand, crucial for a new intellectual movement aimed at questioning the status quo of the field to frame their radical ideas in terms intelligible to the mainstream of that field. In other words, one cannot avoid dialogue with the mainstream. On the other hand, it is equally important for them to frame their ideas so that they position themselves vis-a-vis competitor intellectual movements (whose aims are the same—questioning the status quo). The latter framing might take the polemical form (ibid., p. 224), but alternatively “competitor movements can be discussed in a sophisticated fashion that signals a movement’s association with high-status thinkers and makes its critique of the status quo appear particularly serious” (ibid.; see also Selg 2013). We would suggest that toward semiotics, the polemical strategy is taken by Laclau and Mouffe that results in a virtual silence or very sporadic mentioning of semiotics usually in order to dismiss it (see Laclau 2004, p. 320). Toward post-structuralism, the “sophisticated discussion” strategy is taken.

These moves proved to be fruitful. By the early 1980s, post-structuralism had become the most vociferous new intellectual movement among those questioning the status quo of the social sciences and the humanities. Forty years later, we can say that this movement has succeeded at least in the sense that there is virtually no way of ignoring post-structuralism in any comprehensive overview of current trends in political analysis. And this is the case with Laclau and Mouffe as well despite the diagnosis by Ahonen almost three decades ago that their work “remains a topic of debate in a few residual pockets of academic Marxism in the 1990s” (Ahonen 1993, p. 4). Semiotics, on the other hand, had been the most eminent intellectual movement questioning the same status quo a couple of decades earlier and by the 1980s it was generally considered to be a failure (cf. Culler 2001, pp. xv–xix) or a satellite of structuralism at best. And despite the fact that literally all the ideas Laclau and Mouffe draw from post-structuralism were in fact developed in semiotics already at least a decade earlier, it was post-structuralism that did the trick in the early 1980s. Forty years later, semiotics is largely “outflanked” (Mann 1986, p. 8; Clegg 1989, pp. 218–222) from the field of political analysis.

Of course, this train of thought, as indicated, is a provocation rather than an explanation, since we do not know the motives of Laclau and Mouffe. Nevertheless, what it suggests is that we should not take
their dismissing of semiotics at face-value, but see it as a strategy for securing self-identity of an intellectual movement. Therefore, this book is not about doing justice to semiotics. It is about the usefulness of semiotics for conceptualizing the political (power, democracy, and governance). Basically, we argue that in many respects semiotics is a fruitful complementation to the post-structuralism inspired theory of hegemony, a relational approach to political analysis in its own right. The Tartu-Moscow School of cultural semiotics, from which we heavily draw, shares and always has shared the ontological commitments of post-structuralism: that meaning structures are articulations—not fixed codes—that there is a contingency and tension involved in each meaning-system and that this tendency is resolved mainly through excluding some elements from that system and establishing other elements as the center of that system, and so on. However, it is argued, that what this semiotics might contribute to the theory of hegemony is means for empirical studies of hegemonic formations of power, governance, and democracy, based on their understanding of culture as organically related to communication. Yet the main contribution of the discourse theory to cultural semiotics could be seen in theorizing the aspect of hegemony in the constitution of meaning and hence politicizing the semiotic field—a move not taken up by cultural semiotics (at least not explicitly, although analysis of political phenomena was not utterly alien to them).

Crucial for the theory of political semiotics developed here is that it is based on cultural semiotics. This is an approach that sees culture not as an “object” of study among many. Rather, culture is in a sense a core category for semiotic studies in general according to this approach for which, in addition, “there is an organic link between culture and communication” (Lotman 2001, p. 20, italics added).

According to Juri Lotman who is one of the towering figures of cultural semiotics, the latter is a discipline that explores the mutual effect of differently built semiotic systems, the internal heterogeneity of semiotic spaces and the inevitable heterogeneity of cultural and semiotic polyglotism—the fact that there is always more than one language or coding system involved in articulating whichever meaning (or message). Therefore, one of the fundamental problems for this discipline is the formulation of the question of equivalence of structures, texts, and functions. In other words, a cultural semiotician tries to chart and explain the ways in which heterogeneous elements (texts, structures, etc.) are translated into being equivalent to each other, into being a part of the
same system, despite the fact that every *exact* translation between those elements is strictly speaking an impossibility.

How does this relate to political analysis? We can now point out that in political analysis, there is the similar arena/process dilemma concerning the notion of culture that we discussed at the very end of the previous chapter. We should highlight it in order to clarify the specificity of cultural semiotic approach. The most immediate source for an *arena* definition of culture in political analysis is the paradigm of “political culture.” In its most classical formulation, “political culture” refers to “the political system as internalized in the cognitions, feelings, and evaluations of its population” (Almond and Verba 1963, p. 13). In this definition, culture is *about* something. It is internalized feelings, cognitions, etc. *about* the political system, or as Almond and Verba specify immediately: “the political culture of a nation is the particular distribution of patterns of orientation *toward political objects* among the members of the nation” (ibid., italics added). This *ontological* “aboutness” (cf. Marcus 1993) at the heart of the very definition of culture is an essential feature of the whole “political culture” paradigm in its most influential form. And it is inherently related to the underlying arena definition of the political stating pretty simply that political objects (like parliaments or parties) are out there and one might have different feelings and attitudes—that are, ontologically speaking, objects themselves—*toward* them. And the sum total or the “pattern of orientations to political objects among the members of the nation” (ibid., p. 15) forms the content of “political culture.” In addition, the behaviorist *methodological* values—notably simplicity and rigor—that shaped the emergence of this paradigm in the 1960s have probably contributed to the development resulting in the simple formula “culture = values” as another classic formulation illustrates: “we may regard the political culture as a shorthand expression to denote the set of values within which a political system operates” (Kavanagh 1983, p. 49). Explicitly or tacitly, this formula informs the mainstream of the “political culture” paradigm (see for instance the essays collected in Harrison and Huntington [2000]). And the influence is expanded to other political research traditions that only recently have felt the need to bring in “political culture” as a possible explanatory factor or variable.

“Culture as a unit of analysis has not received much attention in communication research,” Stevenson (2004, p. 373) diagnoses the field of “political communication” and maintains: “Even within the relatively small field of international communication, the opportunity to introduce
culture as an explanatory is ignored and often deliberately avoided” (ibid., p. 381). At the same time, his as well as many other “political communication” researchers’ underlying notion of “political culture” is almost exclusively framed in the roughly Almond/Verba like manner comprising the ontological “aboutness” metaphor (see Swanson 2004, p. 46; Kleinsteuber 2004, p. 74; Pfetsch 2001, p. 47; Swanson and Mancini 1996, pp. 260–261), the methodological “culture = values” formula (see Pfetsch and Esser 2004, p. 7; Esser and Pfetsch 2004, p. 390) or both (Holtz-Bacha 2004, p. 224; Gurevitch and Blumler 2004, p. 335; Amin 2002, pp. 127–128; Pfetsch 2004, p. 348). One of the effects of these parsimonious formulae is that basically “culture” is left untheorized, being merely “operationalized” for concrete studies in terms of values (cf. Inglehart 1977). This holds not only to “political culture” or “political communication,” but for instance, to “political theory” (Scott 2003, p. 111), “political science” (Wedeen 2002, 2004) or “political sociology” (Nash 2010, ch. 1).

At the same time, we have a range of disciplines that set the conceptualization of culture in terms of “meaning practices,” “discourses,” “communication,” etc. at the heart of their theoretical interest. The influence of those disciplines (anthropology, cultural studies, semiotics, discourse analysis) might explain the so-called cultural turn in different strands of contemporary political analysis. David Scott, seeing the Geertzian anthropology (see Geertz 1983, 2001 [1973]) as the primary influence spurring this “turn” in the social sciences of the United States, characterizes the development as “at once a turn to ‘culture’ in a range of disciplines outside of anthropology… that hitherto did not think of culture as their object-domain, and a turn in the concept itself (both inside and outside of anthropology) and in its place in the understanding of human life” (Scott 2003, p. 106). Similarly, according to Nash, whereas classical political sociology “has been seen as concerned, above all, with relations between state and society (Nash 2010, p. 3) or “the social circumstances of politics” (Orum 1983, p. 1, cited in Nash 2010, p. 3), contemporary political sociology is increasingly engaged with what she calls “cultural politics, understood in the broadest possible sense as the contestation and transformation of social identities and structures” (Nash 2010, p. 4). The “cultural turn” in this discipline and in sociology more generally (see Nash 2001) has taken two forms that could be labeled “historical” and “epistemological.” The former refers to “the claim that in contemporary
society, culture plays an unprecedented role in constituting social relations and identities” (Nash 2001, p. 78). This view has affinities with the “aboutness” metaphor described above since it claims basically that “the historical importance of culture has been determined by changes in social structure” (Nash 2010, p. 31). Thus culture, vital as it may be, reflects other, more fundamental bases or is in a way culture about those bases. In other words: culture is one arena or societal sphere among others.

The second—epistemological—version of “cultural turn” subverts this metaphor, since at the core of it is the “idea that culture is universally constitutive of social relations and identities” (Nash 2001, p. 78, italics added) and “it is not reflective or expressive of other social practices” (Nash 2010, p. 30). Besides pointing to a significant influence of Foucault’s work, Nash sees this version of “cultural turn” in the works of for instance Giddens (1984) and of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) despite the fact that neither of them uses the term “culture” very often. What is important is that both Giddens’s structuration theory and Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory are “readily understood in more general terms as an argument for seeing culture as universally constitutive” (Nash 2001, p. 78). A critical conceptual movement in this epistemological version of the “turn” is that culture gets theorized as a mechanism, process, or dynamic system rather than objectified as a matrix of objects (values, attitudes, preferences, etc.). This is evident, of course in the field of cultural studies where culture is “the signifying system through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored” (Williams 1981, p. 13). Moreover, in the increasingly influential “cultural sociology,” “culture” is viewed as “not a thing but a dimension, not an object to be studied as a dependent variable but a thread that runs through, one that can be teased out of, every conceivable social form” (Alexander 2003, p. 7).

The most eminent representative of this new discipline, Jeffrey Alexander points out that thus far culture “has been reduced to ideology or to values, and its contents have largely been read off the architecture of other structures, as a reflection or an inverted mirror” (Alexander 2005, p. 22). With his “cultural sociology,” Alexander tries “to open up this black box” (ibid.) through “incorporating and reinterpreting certain central aspects of the later Durkheim, phenomenology and micro-sociology, symbolic anthropology, structuralist semiotics, narratology, post-structuralism and deconstruction” (ibid.). From our viewpoint, it is immensely important that for Alexander in order to understand politics
“we need [among other things] to employ semiotic theories of binary codes, literary models of rhetoric and narrative, and anthropological concepts of performance and myth” (Alexander 2006, p. 48; see also Alexander 2004). In fact, a similar ethos has informed Wedeen whom we already discussed in the previous chapter and who is one of the few contemporary political scientists that systematically points to the need of conceptualizing “culture” for political science in “semiotic” terms. Her view of “culture as semiotic practices” stipulates that those “practices” refer to “what language and symbols do—how they are inscribed in concrete actions and how they operate to produce observable political effects” (Wedeen 2002, p. 714; cf. Alexander 2004, p. 284). The “semiotic practices approach” she advocates could in her view be useful in many ways for political science, especially since it “avoids the ahistorical, empirically untenable formulation of culture currently invoked by political culture and some rational choice theorists” (ibid., p. 726).

Thus, it might seem that “semiotic” approaches are indeed being recognized and ready to be developed for political analysis. Yet here lies a certain catch that could be introduced by a diagnosis put forward a couple of decades ago: “American sociology, even today, has not made a semiotic turn” (Seidman 1997, p. 43). One of the keys for explaining the accuracy of this judgment—apt not only for characterizing (American) sociology but for political analysis as well—can be found in the general tendency to equate semiotics with structuralism. As a guide to critical theory tells us: “Just as structural anthropology applies structuralist insights to the comparative study of human cultures, semiotics applies structuralist insights to the study of what it calls sign systems” (Tyson 2006, p. 216). The formula “semiotics=structuralism” has been prevalent in text-books of highest ranks (see for example Jasper 2005) as well as in its treatments within more professional social scientific circles (see Mukerji and Schudson 1986, p. 59; Fiol 1989, p. 278; Lemert 1979). If this equation holds then dismissing semiotics from the social sciences is understandable, since not only is it a sort of idealist world-view that treats the world as language, but even more absurdly it treats language as an abstract and static structure and therefore cannot account for structural change and agency—the most crucial questions for social sciences.

Returning to Wedeen and Alexander, we can say that their work provides us with almost a paradigm of this view of semiotics. What is curious about Wedeen’s works is that we do not find any attempt to engage in a dialogue with the eminent representatives of semiotics
(if we do not count a mentioning of Saussure in very general terms [Wedeen 2002, p. 722]). And this despite the fact that the talk of different “semiotic” units is ubiquitous in them: we have for instance, “semiotic circumstances” (Wedeen 2008, p. 56), “semiotic contexts” (ibid., p. 112; see also p. 184; Wedeen 1999, p. 50), “semiotic worlds” (Wedeen 2008, p. 183), “semiotic universes” (ibid., p. 218), and “common semiotic lexicon” (Wedeen 1999, p. 46). She uses the word “semiotic” largely as a synonym for “meaning-related” (she does, to be sure develop her own theory of meaning and politics using for instance speech act theory [Wedeen 2008, pp. 212–217]). In the very few cases where she purports to explicate her understanding of semiotics or the nature of semiotic studies, one can decipher that she has a quasi-structuralist understanding in mind as the following excerpt illustrates:

A semiotic reading of state- and nation-building, however, is unsatisfactory in explaining how symbols and rhetoric actually operate to produce power and generate community, especially because such an analysis does not elaborate the actual effects of symbolic displays, i.e., the ways in which systems of signification are consumed, upheld, contested, and subverted. (Wedeen 1999, p. 18)

What follows immediately is a recourse to Foucault, in our view the most eminent relational student of power, but who for her forms the basis on the recent literature that “focuses on the disciplinary effects of spectacles and language” (ibid.)—the core problematic of her book. In fact, almost identical tendencies characterize Alexander’s output in which, to be sure, attempts at a dialogue with the classics of semiotics are undoubtedly present. For him “even at its most socially embedded, semiotics can never be enough” since “by definition it abstracts from the social world, taking organized symbolic sets as psychologically unmotivated and as socially uncaused” (Alexander 1998, p. 31, italics added). Thus “for the purposes of cultural sociology, semiotic codes must be tied into both social and psychological environments and into action itself” (ibid.). And finally, like Wedeen, he turns to Foucault: “I will term the result of this specification discourses, in appreciation of, though not identification with, the phenomena conceptualized by Foucault” (Alexander 1998, p. 31). This recourse to Foucault after critical invoking of the “semiotics=structuralism” formula in those two American examples is
symptomatic in two respects. First, the above-mentioned “epistemological” version of the “cultural turn” “has been very much influenced by Foucault’s theory of discourse” (Nash 2010, p. 30). Second, Foucault himself rejected semiotics/semiology and other “analyses couched in terms of the symbolic field or the domain of signifying structures” (Foucault 1980, p. 114). The reason for this is that “history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning” (ibid.). In other words, conflict should be at the focus of our attention and “‘semiology’ is a way of avoiding its violent, bloody and lethal character by reducing it to the calm Platonic form of language and dialogue” (Foucault 1980, p. 115).

Foucault is not the only preeminent relational political theorist who sets the problem of meaning at the core of his theorizing and at the same time dismisses semiotics equated with structuralism/idealism. Likewise, for Bourdieu semiotics is an “intellectualist philosophy which treats language as an object of contemplation rather than as an instrument of action and power” (1991, p. 37; see also Bourdieu 1998, pp. 52–53). However, it is instructive to point to Geertz who recalls how in the 1970s “the identification of semiotics, in the general sense of the science of signs, with structuralism seemed to me important to resist” (Geertz 2001 [1973], p. 12). Similarly in developing his structuration theory, Giddens points to the “extraordinary advances in semiotics which have been pioneered in recent decades” but warns us immediately that “we have to guard against the association of semiotics with structuralism and with the shortcomings of the latter in respect of the analysis of human agency” (1984, p. 31). Thus, we should clarify the relation between (cultural) semiotics and structuralism. Here, hopefully, not surprisingly, the distinction between self-actionalism, inter-actionalism, and trans-actionalism is of help to clarify different perspectives in semiotics, of which structuralism is but one, namely self-actionalist version.

4.2 STRUCTURALIST SELF-ACTIONALISM IN SEMIOTICS

As we have argued elsewhere (Selg and Ventsel 2010, pp. 455–456) the already mentioned Juri Lotman’s central notion of translation draws a clear distinction between the cultural semiotic approach and the classical structuralism that conceived language as a system [langue] as more primary compared to speech [parole]. For Lotman (most unambiguously in his works since the late 1970s) such a fundamental distinction was
impossible: one cannot conceive language and speech separately. Generation of meaning is not an automatic realization of language resources (code, structure) from one language into another, but an approximate, contingent, or rhetoric translation in the conditions of (partial) untranslatability. Hence the centrality of rhetorical translation as meaning generating mechanism in Lotman’s view of culture, text, and semiosphere. Thus, from the Lotmanian perspective that is adopted in this book, it is clear that semiotics should not be equated with structuralism despite the fact that it tends to be commonplace that Lotman’s initial point of departure in the 1960s was structuralist.  

If semiotics is not structuralism, then why is it the case that it is frequently conflated with it in the social sciences (as the examples provided above indicate)? A reason could be that at least one of the founding works of semiotics is usually thought to be the founding work of structuralism as well. We have in mind Saussure’s Course in General Linguistics (1983 [1916]). Lotman is clear that despite the intensive developments of semiotics in the second half of the twentieth century it is the “legacy of Saussure whose works, even after Jakobson had criticized them and contrasted them with the ideas of C. S. Peirce, remain in force as the foundation stones of semiotics” (Lotman 2001, p. 5). As Umberto Eco points out in his overview of Lotman’s contribution:

it must be remembered that semiotics and structuralism form a highly complex pair of terms. Semiotics aims to study the entire range of sign systems (of which the verbal language is the most important) and the various processes of communication to which these systems give rise. — Structuralism is a method which has been shown to be extremely useful in the explanation of linguistic systems, in the work of Saussure and, later, of Hjelmslev and Jakobson. (Eco 2001, p. ix, italics added)

Eco’s reference to the “processes of communication” is crucial for our purposes when we articulate a trans-actionalist perspective on semiotics in the next chapter. But now let us take a closer look at structuralism. Saussure describes the relationship between semiology/semiotics and theory of language as follows:

A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology (from Greek semeion ‘sign’). ... Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology; the laws discovered by semiology
will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological facts. (de Saussure 1983 [1916], p. 16)

Language as the most complex and universal among the semiological systems has certain primacy: therefore, linguistics is a model for all semiology even though language is just one type of semiological system (de Saussure 1983). As is well known, one of the routes taken from the foundational statements of Saussure on semiology is what is known as structuralism or structuralist semiotics. It is, of course, in no way the only route that can be taken from Saussure. When semiotics is equated with structuralism, it is (tacitly or explicitly) viewed as a static (synchronic) analysis that purports to reveal what the world “tells us” through mechanical collecting of signs in order to reveal the abstract underlying system (structure) that governs those collections. Heiskala delineates the “six feet” of this straw man. “The first is the claim that structures are closed codes” (Heiskala 2003, p. 191). It is deemed necessary for making intelligible the fixed identities (meanings) of signs. This is something that could be found, for instance, in Greimas’s structural semantics (1983). As a way of criticizing this part of the strawman Heiskala (2003, p. 196) points out that some structures may indeed be closed, but this is rather a special case of them, the emergence of which is itself an important subject of research. The second part of the straw man is the claim that “the structure only consists of associative relations. Syntagmatic relations have been excluded from the structure into the domain of realization taking place in discourse, i.e., speech” (Heiskala 2003, p. 192). This is the part he deals with in the seventh chapter of his book, demonstrating “that even if it is not possible to define the syntagmatic relation without the idea of a fixed sequence, the existence of syntagmatic relation does not require the temporal realization of syntagma in a discourse” (Heiskala 2003, p. 162). The third part of the straw man: “associative relations are interpreted as paradigms” (Heiskala 2003, p. 192). Barthes (1994, p. 59) could be used to exemplify this point: “we speak today, not of the associative, but of the paradigmatic plane” (quoted in Heiskala 2003, p. 192). Through Lévi-Strauss (1963) this view came to inform important strands of structural anthropology, seeing paradigmatic relations as culturally crystallized codes that due to the closed nature of codes are reduced to finite numbers of elements. Heiskala proposes that we should revitalize the original Saussurean use of the term “associative relations”
that captures better the partly contingent and ambiguous identity of structural elements. Through this revitalization, we could, among other things, formulate better the problem of structural change. Structuralism’s incapacity to formulate it has lied behind a number of criticisms toward it (Heiskala 2003, p. 196). The fourth leg of the straw man the claim that “the relations between the elements of the structure are binary” (Heiskala 2003, p. 193) should first receive the clarification that the real founder of this line of thinking is in fact not Saussure, but Roman Jakobson (1971). An orthodox “binarist” could, again, be considered Greimas (cf. Greimas and Rastier 1968) and, of course, Lévi-Strauss (1963) (Heiskala 2003, p. 193). To point to the unnecessary limits of this picture, we could via Heiskala stress that though the binary relations could be considered important, there is still plenty of reasons to believe that for example, the triadic relations (a central theme for Peirce) are as important for the sign systems studies and that there is no reason to dismiss the possibility that through empirical research, even more complex relations are discerned (Heiskala 2003, p. 196). The next part of the straw man is probably the most powerful: “the structure is unconscious” (Heiskala 2003, p. 194). The founding father involved is, again, Lévi-Strauss, but probably the figure with almost the same level of influence is Jacques Lacan for whom “the unconscious is structured like a language” (Heiskala 2003, p. 194). Lacan’s development in structuralism has a twofold impact for the establishment of the straw man: (1) despite the fact that his psychoanalysis tries to go beyond the domain of classical structuralism (e.g., Levi-Strauss), he “carries the program out so that natural language and other cultural meaning systems are interpreted as closed and oppressing codes” (Heiskala 2003, p. 195). (2) He turns “Saussure’s linguistic and semiological concept of sign into a psychoanalytic one” (Heiskala 2003, p. 195). Through this transformation “the order of signifieds becomes tied to the domain of unconscious and rejected mental processes” (Heiskala 2003, p. 195). For criticism of this view, one could point out that there is no reason to assume that all or even the majority of structures are unconscious since “cultural interpretations of structures do not always or even in most cases concern the unconscious elements of culture” and “when they do, there are no unequivocal mechanisms of validating the interpretation, but the interpretation opens the way for a cultural semiosis which is, in principle, endless” (Heiskala 2003, p. 199). The last part of the straw man is also very notorious: “the structures
are universal” (Heiskala 2003, p. 195). This view has informed Lévi-
Strauss’s anthropology as well as Chomskian linguistics. But that is far
from being comprehensive. Searching for such universal structures could
be interesting, yet “it meets but a small fraction of the cognitive interests
of a social scientist” (Heiskala 2003, p. 200). Even if we could intelligibly
speak of such universal constants, social scientists are primarily interested
in the different manifestation of those constants in different contexts
(Heiskala 2003, p. 200). And in most cases, there is no need whatsoever
to postulate some underlying (essentialist) category for interpreting local
structures and their structural change (Heiskala 2003, p. 200).

We argue that the research program known as structuralism is a form
of self-actionalist understanding of semiotics. Offhand, it might sound
peculiar that we regard structuralism, that ontologically emphasizes the
primacy of structural relations, as a self-actional approach. Relevant here
is that language is being studied as a structure (a system), that needs to be
studied in its inner complexity and temporarily frozen manner (synchron-
ically), rather than as temporarily moving (diachronically). According
to the structuralist reading of Saussure, language is a social (collective)
phenomenon and does not include individual (concrete) language uses.
Therefore, linguistics should first and foremost study language as a cohe-
sive and comprehensive system that is governed by general structural
laws—laws that are independent of particular speakers. From here, it is
inferred that according to Saussure, language exists prior to speech, and
the latter merely realizes the possibilities that exist inherently in language.
Therefore, structuralists can say that according to Saussure, language is a
closed, self-sufficient and self-determining system (Hawkes 2003, p. 16).
It is for this reason that structuralism can be considered self-actional. The
self-actional characterization of language does not entail that there is no
place for change in language. However, it would mean change in the sense
of changing from one self-acting system to another one.

Originating from linguistics structuralism encompasses various research
programs in the social sciences and humanities, that see invariant relations
(structures) in the dynamics of different systems as their proper research
object. Structuralism is related to various philosophical strategies of the
twentieth century. Thus, the “desubstantialisation” of traditional meta-
physics is continued that was already initiated by Kant and continued by
Nietzsche. It is claimed that the relational properties of elements can be
known for human consciousness and they even have greater gnoseological
value than that of substantial properties.
One of the cornerstones of structuralism is that the structure of language is identical to the structure of thinking and the principles of organizing the world. For instance, both structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and literary theorist Roland Barthes share an understanding that generating individual acts of expression is enabled by the system prior to them. Whereas Saussure was interested in the primary semiological system (the language itself), Barthes and Lévi-Strauss wanted to show how a sign of a primary system can become a signifier in the myth as a secondary system. Barthes’s aim was to semiotically uncover and ideologically criticize the so-called mass culture, Lévi-Strauss wished to point to those main structural principles—codes and conventions—that underlie all the specific and historically changing cultures and myths. Both are primarily interested in the model of structure through which a myth becomes meaningful. The notion of structure enables them to view individual phenomena as variations of universal historical laws (Barthes 1987).

In 1958 Levi-Strauss’ *Structural Anthropology* was published, where the universality of language is claimed and in which to a large extent the methodological principles of structural linguistics are extrapolated to anthropology: (a) cultural phenomena must be analyzed synchronically; (b) cultural phenomena must be studied in terms of their internal and external unity, in other words as closed systems; (c) cultural phenomena must be analyzed as multidimensional, but at the same time as part of a unified whole; and (d) the final goal is to model the structure or the presumed algorithm, that determines the hidden logic of development and existence of phenomena. The underlying algorithm must also give guidance for moving from one developmental formation to another. Consequently, for structuralists, the entire cultural system can be viewed in terms of binary oppositions (own-alien, good-bad, man-woman, birth-death, nature-culture, Christianity-paganism, mind-body, freedom-slavery, etc.).

It is important that structuralist semiotic tradition has also produced analyses that are relevant for political analysis: namely the analyses of power. Power from the semiotic point of view can be seen as a certain relationship within and between different semiotic systems. By semiotic systems, we mean both the systems required for coding meaning (e.g., language in a wider semiotic sense) as well as the meaningful wholes or discourses created through them. Every semiotic system entails the exclusion of certain other possible systems. Therefore, power is present
potentially in every signifying process or meaning-making (see Ventsel 2009, 2011; Selg 2011). From here, several important questions arise to which the structuralist tradition has tried answer. How do different systems of meaning affect each other? How should we talk about the transformation and dynamics of power relations? What is the role of the excluded systems?

Two prominent structuralists, Barthes and Greimas, view power in a self-actional manner. In his *Mythologies* (1987 [1957]) Barthes distinguished between three positions from which the myth receives its (correct) meaning: (1) the one who constructs the myth who, hiding his/her self-interests, wants to persuade an audience of the “naturalness” of certain ideas; (2) the one who deconstructs the myth, who disposes this strategy and subverts the propagated idea; and (3) the one who lives in the myth, for whom what is presented in the myth is exactly what he/she lives by. It is vital that these three positions are presented by Barthes as closed systems. In his later work *Criticism and Truth* (1966), he emphasizes the presumption of closedness in the study of meaning even more and claims that the “truth” is not in the external conditions that lead to the creation of texts, but the “truth” needs to be sought for in the texts themselves, in their meaning.

Algirdas Greimas whose works are important for the semiotic study of power has, among other things contributed to the semiotics of manipulation (Greimas and Courtés 1982), concentrating thus mainly on the first and the third position in Barthes’s distinction. In case of manipulation, we have communication in which the sender-manipulator directs the receiver-manipulate toward both changing knowledge and changing behavior. In manipulation, the receiver’s freedom is limited and he/she is forced to act according to the wishes of the sender. We could say that what underlies manipulation is persuasion, and hence the sender is engaged in persuading and the receiver in interpretation. In his/her action of persuasion, the sender as a manipulator can hinge on the modality of being-able-to-do. From the pragmatic point of view here are roughly two possibilities. First, the sender can manipulate through positive (culturally valued) or negative (dangers) objects. Second, the manipulator can persuade the receiver through knowledge. Of course, both manipulative strategies can be present simultaneously. Thus, the manipulator can, through describing various societal dangers (e.g. climate change), induce in the receiver the need for knowledge and competence for solving the problem that is described as a danger—and then the sender can provide
The question here is not about the objectivity of danger or its solution, but about strategies of persuading the receiver into doing what the sender wishes. According to Greimas and Courtés, we can distinguish between different types of manipulation: (1) if in the receiver the modality of not-being-able-not-to-do is coupled with the modality of having-to-do, then the result is provocation or intimidation; (2) if the subject-receiver adds to wanting-to-do modality to the not-being-able-not-to-do modality, then the result is either seduction or temptation (Greimas and Courtés 1982, pp. 201–203). It is important that the relation between the sender and the receiver is asymmetrical in case of manipulation. It is a relation between superior and subordinate. Exchange of information is controlled by the superior manipulating structure and it is for this reason that Greimas and Courtés’s work can be considered self-actional. What about inter-actionalism? Tendentially we can read out this kind of position in semiotics from various critical stances toward structuralism.

4.3 Inter-actionalism in Semiotics: Post-structuralism, Intertextuality, and Dialogism

In semiotics, we can relate the inter-actionalist approach to the emergence of post-structuralism and deconstructionism. The 1960s, but especially the 1970s mark the period of movement to adopt negative strategy toward the meaning of texts. This can be called deconstructionism. Demonstrating disruptions in the textual fabric, inconsistencies and tactics of destructing the principal unity that underlies every speech act became now the major task for the humanities, especially literary studies (Gasparov 2009, p. 188; Itkonen 1987). Post-structuralism encompasses very different approaches, but they all unite in their focus on subjects, which is an opposition to the pursuit of objectivity of structuralism. In the current context, it relates to the notion of intertextuality and to the methodological understanding that in order to explain meaning one has to increasingly involve extratextual factors and relations between a particular text and other communication participants, mainly other texts. All this enabled to subvert the power position of the speaker and also the ideological illusion of the necessity of the domination of authoritative texts and point to its contingency.

In Sémiotiké (1969) Julia Kristeva distinguishes between pheno-text and geno-text in her effort to overcome the widely shared common sense that the signifier is monolithic. According to Kristeva one needs
to move further from the structural analysis of language: to the levels of pre-structure and non-structure of language, from meanings to the meaning-making process, ultimately from the conscious to the unconscious. Pheno-text refers to the material expression of the text, its presentation, and it takes part in the communicative function of the text. Geno-text, however, is the primary terrain of any signifying process. It is the abstract terrain of the linguistic functioning of the text, that precedes phrasal structures, precedes every specification, and counters completed structure. Geno-text encompasses all the semiotic processes, diffused impulses, those disruptions that they cause in the continuity of a social system. Geno-text is the hidden foundation of both the wholeness of meaning and its breakdown since it is the only carrier of psychic energy in which the subject has not yet lost its unity. Although identifiable in language, geno-text remains unreachable for linguistics. For this reason, Kristeva brought in the notion of “semioanalysis” that relates linguistics, semiotics, and psychoanalysis.

While geno-text is structureless and with diffused boundaries, pheno-text follows the culturally established communicative norms and takes into account the limitations set in force by addressee-addressee. Various rules and limitations (mostly social and political) suspend the unlimited flow of geno-text, block it and push it into a certain structure, fixing this way the continuous process into a stable symbolic form. This is a completed semiotic signified constituted according to the cultural and ideological codes specific to an era. Every text is a unification of the two and thus inherently ambiguous (Kristeva 1974, p. 248). Unfortunately, Kristeva has not provided a methodology for studying the relations between the two terrains (Torop 1999, p. 30).

Kristeva had a considerable influence on Barthes’s distinction between text and work, which he presented for the first time in a paper “From Work to Text” (1980) published originally in 1971. While the work is something material, like for instance, a book in the hands of the reader, text refers to a certain methodological field in which what is written in a book lets itself perceived as meaningful (Barthes 1980, pp. 156–157). At the same time, under the rubric of work go also monolingually coded systems, where the meaning of work is reduced to a single signified: from the linguistic point of view, it is a transparent relation between the signifier and the signified, for structuralism and classical hermeneutics (in the romantic period, e.g., Dilthey) it would be a discovery of one and only true meaning. Text, however, is for Barthes, characterized by
differentiality—reading a text is always non-recurrent and unique “and nevertheless woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages (what language is not?), antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony” (Barthes 1980, p. 159). Every text is an intertext of another text, but this intertextuality should not be confused with the origins of text, which would refer, again, to the possibility of reconstructing the original meaning of text. The latter would again enable restoring some final instance or “truth” and relaunching the illusion of objectivity.

We can see that both Barthes and Kristeva repeat essentially the same idea. Both wish to avoid source-critical connotations with their notions of text. In Kristeva, it is the notion of geno-text that points to unarticulated and unstructured intertextuality entailing that texts are always oriented toward other texts. Barthes, however, feels the need to explicitly emphasize this distinction. For him, intertextuality is the anonymous space consisting of other texts, citations, paragraphs, names, etc. where the origins of elements of which it is composed of are not possible to identify anymore. Therefore, one cannot imply that one text is composed of a countable set of intertexts whose act of “primary baptism” can be traced back. Text is a network that expands through combination and systematization and one needs not to presume organic unity (Barthes 1980, p. 161). This principle also opposes to the well-known notion of the hermeneutic circle, which points to the possibility of moving from whole to parts and vice versa, which would entail organic unity.

With these examples we witness a crucial theoretical switch: in the analysis of the creation of unknown texts it is more important to focus on meanings in the text and meanings for the new reader, than identifying the “original” influences (Torop 1999, p. 30). Texts are combined in the field of intertextuality and there is no presumption of a structure having a determining influence on the elements of text. Inter-action with the reader emerges as an important factor. But in case of both Kristeva and Barthes, we should emphasize that the meanings of those intertexts are nevertheless preserved, although the presumption of the existence of certain origins of their initial meaning is put under question. It is in that sense that they have moved from self-actionalism to inter-actionalism. At the same time in both of the authors, what remains undertheorized is how to construct the meaning of an intertext itself retroactively as something that is external to text. Therefore, their work is difficult to utilize for analyses of concrete texts. Their major contribution consists in putting
into question the determining role of closed structure in meaning-making that is presumed by structuralist self-actionalism (Ventsel 2009).

We can approach inter-actionalism in semiotics from another angle. In the period under question, we cannot ignore the reception of Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism in the West. The discovery and rereading of Bakhtin took place in the post-structuralist environment. The notion of dialogism was set not as a mechanism of describing *intratextual* structural relations, but mainly as a mechanism that explains the relations of text and the *extratextual* (Torop 1999, p. 29; Gasparov 2009, p. 188).

When discussing dialogue, Bakhtin emphasizes the specific relationship underlying its formal positions. One can say that in a dialogue, there is a primacy of potential response, the principle of activation that creates the ground for active response. Active understanding assimilates the word into a new conceptual system, where an array of complex interrelations, accords and discords are established, and it is enriched with new elements. The speaker’s orientation toward the listener is an orientation toward a specific conceptual horizon, the distinctive world of the listener. The most important condition for the emergence of a dialogue is the existence of a communication partner who is at the same time similar and different (whether it be another person, culture, semiotic language): their nonidentity enables them to issue different texts, their similarity guarantees mutual translatability. Thus, an inter-action is created in a dialogue between different points of view, conceptual horizons, social languages, and emphases (Bakhtin 2001). In view of the notion of inter-actionalism as outlined in Chapter 2, we can say that in Bakhtin’s treatment the participants in a dialogue change through inter-action, but also exist prior to the act of communication: the speaker penetrates through dialogue the foreign conceptual horizon of the listener and constructs its own utterance in a foreign territory (Bakhtin 2001, p. 282). We may ask whether we have conceptual resources for an accurate description of such communication mechanisms that at the same time constitutes all the participants in communication (addresser, addressee, language (code), message (text), and context)? Bakhtin was very skeptical toward using the notion of dialogism in applications of semiotic theories. It seems that his skepticism derives mainly from the equation of semiotics with classical structuralism that attempts to reduce everything to static structures, neglecting the communicative and contextual character of the generation of meaning. In Bakhtin’s conception of dialogue the utterance (act of speech) is opposed to text as a static structure and language or code underlying it (Bakhtin
1986, p. 359), because text as an utterance is at the same time unique, individual, and non-recurrent (Grzybek 1995, p. 3). The basis for this criticism was a one-sided reduction of semiotics to the structural linguistics of de Saussure and from there to the early works of Barthes (Chandler 2002; Culler 1975). As a result, further developments in semiotics were left largely unnoticed by critics (Ventsel 2011, p. 59).

4.4 TRANS-ACTIONALISM: CULTURAL SEMIOTICS

The above-sketched conceptions of text—which in no way pretends to cover all the relevant contributions—insist a certain trajectory of development: there is a movement to include increasingly versatile, open, unstructured information into analysis of texts, until at some point text as a phenomenon loses its delimitation entirely; or it is reduced to a principle of unification and mutual influence that pervades throughout the entire cultural history. As argued by Gasparov, if we include context into the structure of the text, then this structure is dissolved by various factors in the imagined environment surrounding the text (Gasparov 2009, p. 189).

Such a development crosses the limits of analyzability: when there are no boundaries, there is no object of study. A way out of this impasse is treating text/discourse as a paradoxical phenomenon. On the one hand, it is a unity, a closed whole with clear boundaries—otherwise, it would not even be perceivable as a meaningful text. On the other hand, it is a whole that emerges from an open, uncountable plurality of heterogeneous and multidimensional components. Its possible interpretations cannot be pushed under a pre-given structure, given the inexhaustible potential of mutual influence of its components and sources.

This is the approach to the text that the Tartu-Moscow School of cultural semiotics offers. Cultural semiotics sets for itself the foundational thesis: “None of the sign systems possesses a mechanism which would enable it to function culturally in isolation” (Ivanov et al. 1998, p. 33). From this, the school puts forth a thoroughly trans-actional approach to meaning-making. A crucial category for making sense of this trans-actional logic is the semiosphere, which we here describe very briefly, given that the next chapter is dedicated to its constitution where we take up the theoretical synthesis of the Tartu-Moscow School of semiotics and the Essex school of discourse theory.

What is semiosphere? It is a conditional heterogeneous space of meaning-making (Lotman 2005). The semiosphere is the whole cultural
universe of a given culture, including all its speech, communication, and textual systems such as literature and myth. The individual (his/her life, behavior, social position, but also book, posting in online communication, etc.), as well as an entire culture, can be regarded as a semiotic unit: text/semiosphere. In his later vocabulary, Lotman replaced the notion of text with that of semiosphere, which indicates a more dynamic aspect of culture. “Relative to the whole, located at other levels in the structural hierarchy, they (semiosphere/text) reveal an isomorphic quality. Thus, they are, simultaneously, the whole and its likeness” (Lotman 2005, p. 215). Semiosphere as a semiotic unit is a meaningful whole as well as an active generator of meaning. “As soon as two monads [semiotic units] make contact, forming a common semiotic mechanism, they proceed from the state of mutual neutrality to the condition of mutual complementarity, structural antonymy, and they start to cultivate their own specific character and mutual contrast” (Lotman 1997, p. 11). At the ontological level, communication has a heterogeneous inner structure. The same semiotic unity can enter into different unities at higher structural levels as a sub-structure; thus it can maintain its wholeness while being a part of higher semiotic wholes, and in that sense by not being identical with itself, “it inevitably presumes a complex polyglotism of its internal structure” (Lotman 1997, p. 12). If a particular communicator starts to interact with other entities in communication, then it does not remain identical with itself; on the contrary, its nature is substantially defined by specific relations with other semiotic units (Madisson and Ventsel 2018).

From this theoretical perspective, every semiosphere can be studied as a separate totality, but every totality in a culture that can be analyzed is simultaneously part of a larger totality (Torop 2003, pp. 335–336). There is an endless dialogue between a part and a whole.

Especially in his later works, Lotman’s aim is to explicate this mechanism of semiosis or meaning-making in the semiosphere through the notion of translation. According to Lotman, the elementary condition for meaning-making is coding via at least two different coding systems that are at least partly untranslatable to each other. At the most fundamental level, we can speak of discrete and non-discrete (or continuous) coding systems. The mutual untranslatability of those coding systems is due to their fundamentally different structuring principles. In a discrete system, “the basic bearer of meaning is the segment (= sign), while the text or the chain of segments (= text) is secondary, its meaning being derived
from the meanings of the signs” (Lotman 2001, p. 36). In the discrete coding systems, the signs are linked to signs. Linear, causal, logical, or chronological sequences characterize texts of this type (Lotman 2004, p. 572). In the continuous (or non-discrete) systems, the primary bearer of meaning is the text “that does not dissolve into signs, but is itself a sign or isomorphic to a sign. Here, not the rules of linking signs are active, but the rhythm and symmetry (or arrhythmia and asymmetry, respectively)” (Lotman 2004, p. 577). The sign is transformed into its other manifestations or becomes equivalent to the corresponding blur of meaning on some other level. Phenomena that appear different gain ability to become equivalent; various analogies, homomorphisms and isomorphisms become possible that are characteristic of poetic texts and partly also to mathematic and philosophical texts (Lotman 2004, p. 572). Translation between those coding systems is culture-specific: between different systems certain rules of equivalence and compliance are imposed (Lotman 2010, p. 117).

* We have argued in this chapter that semiotics has at least three different versions of semiotics: self-actionalism that is represented mainly by structuralist accounts; inter-actionalism that is associated with various perspectives of intertextuality, dialogism, deconstruction, post-modernism, and post-structuralism that see meaning-systems (texts, discourses) as basically open structures with impossible closure. Finally, trans-actionalism that acknowledges the essential tension at the heart of meaning-systems (texts, semiospheres) and the impossibility of final closure of any system of meaning, but at the same time theorizes the mechanisms of how this tension is partly overcome. Here the contribution of the Tartu-Moscow School of cultural semiotics is of particular importance. In the next chapter, we open up this school’s framework in more detail by comparing and synthesizing it to the Essex school of discourse theory which we also consider as a trans-actional approach to meaning and the socio-political, not as a form of “postmodernism” with which it is often associated. As a result, we put forth a framework of political semiotics which would ground our methodological proposals and methods for relational political analysis.
Notes

1. Barthes (1987 [1957], pp. 127, 133). To be sure, he uses the term only in passing and does not fully develop the underlying concept. As a way of suggesting a twisted analogy with Laclau and Mouffe’s work, we could say that in Barthes’s Mythologies there is politics all over the place—especially in his discussions of myth as “depoliticised speech” (ibid., pp. 142–145)—but this politics is left untheorized (though one can certainly decipher Barthes’ affinities with the radical democratic ideal outlined by Laclau and Mouffe [1985, ch. 4]).

2. The latter term was used by Saussure for the general study of signs; the origins of the former term are usually associated with Peirce. Nowadays they are often used interchangeably, but “semiotics” has become the most common general term.

3. To be sure, a certain ambivalence is related to even this commonplace. Thus, for Eco, on the one hand, Lotman “is a critic who started from a structuralist approach to the phenomenon of signification and communication, and indeed retains much of this method but who does not remain bound by it” (Eco 2001, p. ix). Eco goes on to identify two crucial problems for structuralists that Lotman over the years tried to overcome: (1) that “certain systems, through communication processes (which are historical processes, that is processes which take place in time) changed” (ibid.); (2) “given that a semiotic system was seen as code, or rather as a system of rules, how could there be communication processes in which it was difficult to identify codes or where there seemed to be a conflict between different codes?” (ibid.). Yet Eco points out that the non-structuralist insights were present in Lotman’s work already in the 1960s: on the one hand, Lotman remained faithful to Saussure’s opposition of langue and parole and Jakobsonian distinction between code and message (ibid.); on the other hand, he was already then aware “that no historical period has a sole cultural code… and that in any culture there exist simultaneously various codes” (ibid., p. x). This way, Eco maintains, “Lotman is moving beyond structuralist dogmatism and offering a more complex and articulated approach” (ibid.). From a slightly different perspective, Grishakova has argued more recently that “[w]hat makes Lotman’s practical, applied-semiotic works (even of his early structuralist period) flexible enough is the fact that his scholarly ‘double vision’, though system-oriented, always included a human agency or conscious authorship of every ‘systemic’ act” (Grishakova 2009, p. 182).

4. “который не распадается на знаки, а сам является знаком или изоморфен знаку. Здесь активны не правила соединения знаков, а ритм и симметрия (соответственно аритмия и асимметрия).”
REFERENCES


In this chapter, we move from meta-theoretical reflections to theoretical synthesis. We have demonstrated thus far that trans-actional or strictly relational analyses of power, governance, and democracy need to conceptualize these phenomena as processes of meaning-making that are constitutive of social action. We have also pointed out that the crucial category for the Essex school of discourse analysis, hegemony, can be seen as a trans-actionalist notion of the political in that sense. In addition, we pointed out that there is a straightforward semiotic potential in the Essex school’s framework, but that in tune with the usual social scientific commonplace they dismissed semiotics which they thought to be merely a version of structuralism. We then showed that besides structuralism, there are various research programs in semiotics that are in accordance with the trans-actional approach and that most important of them is the Tartu-Moscow School of cultural semiotics. In this chapter, we want to demonstrate how the latter, in fact, complements the Essex school thus that a complete theory of political semiotics with direct bearings on relational political analysis can be developed. We start with very brief positioning of the Essex school among the mainstream approaches to political analysis and then move directly to the synthesis with cultural semiotics.1

It seems efficient to start this with juxtaposing discourse analysis with behavioral, rationalist, and positivist approaches that discourse theory completely rejects. Behavioralism presumes a crude separation of socially
constructed meanings and interpretations on the one hand, and objective behavior and action on the other. Drawing from the general hermeneutic critique of such separation and “following the writings of Weber, Taylor, Winch and Wittgenstein, discourse theory stresses that meanings, interpretations and practices are always inextricably linked” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, p. 6). This is, of course quite elementary, given the trans-actionalist perspective of discourse theory: discourse is constitutive of action—meaning that no action can be made sense of outside a certain discourse—not just an additional variable to be included in causal explanations of action.

From the perspective of discourse theory, one should also reject rationalist approaches to social analysis, “which presume that social actors have given interests and preferences or which focus on the rational (or irrational) functioning of social systems” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, p. 6). Discourse theorists “stress the historical contingency and ‘structural impossibility’ of social systems, and refuse to posit essentialist conceptions of social agency. Instead, agents and systems are social constructs that undergo constant historical change as a result of political practices” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, p. 6).

One of the firmest oppositions is, of course, between discourse theory and the positivistic conceptions of knowledge and the methods that tend to be built on natural-scientific approaches to the study of society. Discourse theory “firmly rejects the search for scientific laws of society and politics grounded on empirical generalisations, which can form the basis of testable empirical predictions” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, pp. 6–7). The discourse theory rejects a naïve conception of truth (as in, say, “correspondence theory”) that often underlies positivistic approaches. And as a result of that it also “rejects the rigid separation of facts and values, accepting that the discourse theorist and analyst is always located in a particular historical and political context with no neutral Archimedean point from which to describe, argue, and evaluate” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, p. 7).

When we move to the main positive theoretical sources of discourse theory and discourse analysis, it is vital to stress the multifaceted character of this approach that picks up its analytical tools from Marxism, doing it, however, through radicalizing and deconstructing them from the perspective of social constructivist and interpretive models. Discourse theory and discourse analysis reject, to be sure, the class-reductionism
and economic determinism of Marxism and try to radicalize Gramsci’s and Althusser’s reworking of Marxist conceptions of politics and ideology. A valuable source of insights for this radicalization is the post-structuralist critique of language that paves the way for a non-essentialist and purely relational conception of meaning and discourse. “In so doing, discourse theory conceives of society as a symbolic order in which social antagonisms and structural crises cannot be reduced to essential class cores determined by economic processes and relations” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, pp. 5–6). This, in fact, indicates another essential difference with the approaches that invoke seemingly similar vocabulary (discourse, hegemony) as does the Essex discourse analysis.

A contrast with Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School’s style of analysis consist in the latter’s “retention of the ontological separation between different types of social practice, whether understood as ideological, sociological, economic or political. Discourse theorists, by contrast, affirm the discursive character of all social practices and objects, and reject the idea that ideological practices simply constitute one area or ‘region’ of social relations” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, p. 4). It is vital to stress this point since it demarcates a clear difference from “those approaches to political analysis that use the concept of discourse, but regard discourses as little more than sets of ideas or beliefs shared by policy communities, politicians or social movements” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, p. 4).

Thus far, we have referred to the notion of discourse mostly in negative terms, trying to fix the main differences between this conception and other available approaches to social analysis. We turn next to the positive characteristics of this concept as these are set forth by discourse theory that underlies the discourse analysis. But before we should summarize the main task of the latter, by indicating that since according to discourse theory of the Essex school, the agents and social relations “are social constructs that undergo constant historical change as a result of political practices” the “major task of the discourse theorist is to chart and explain such historical and social change by recourse to political factors and logics” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, p. 6). It is one of the fundamental assumptions of discourse theory that no identity, no society, or any other system of meaning is fully capable of constituting itself. Every society and identity is strictly speaking an impossibility, a never-ending attempt to fully constitute itself (see Laclau 1990). But “the task of the discourse analyst is to explore the different forms of this impossibility, and
the mechanisms by which the blockage of identity is constructed in antagonistic terms by social agents” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, p. 10). This, however, lets us draw an important parallel with the tasks that are seen for the semiotics of culture in the Tartu-Moscow School.

According to Lotman, semiotics of culture or cultural semiotics is a discipline that explores the mutual effect of differently built semiotic systems, the internal heterogeneity of semiotic spaces and the inevitable heterogeneity of cultural and semiotic polyglotism (Lotman 2002a [1981], p. 158). Therefore, one of the fundamental problems for this discipline is “the formulation of the question of equivalence of structures, texts, functions” (Ivanov et al. 1998, p. 55). In other words, a cultural semiotician tries to chart the ways in which heterogeneous elements (texts, structures, etc.) are translated into being equivalent to each other, into being a part of the same system, despite the fact that every exact translation between those elements is strictly speaking an impossibility.

Our claim is that this apparent congeniality between the tasks that are seen for the researchers in each tradition is not a mere coincident, but stems from a much deeper agreement between the very basic notions of the fundamental theories underlying those approaches. When the Essex school uses mainly the term “discourse” as the most central category for their theory, the Tartu-Moscow School is famous for the term “semiosphere” that has since the 1980s been replacing the earlier notion of “text” as the most fundamental category of their approach. Still, it is important to stress from the beginning that for Lotman and the Tartu-Moscow School “text” is the basic concept of cultural semiotics and culture is treated as “text” in their framework (see below). What in Lotman’s later works becomes known as “semiosphere” designates basically the same set of conceptual relations in his theory as the concept of “text,” referring to a bounded and organized system of meanings. Often he uses those concepts interchangeably.

5.1 Bringing Discourse Theory and Cultural Semiotics into a Dialogue

We start our demonstration of the fundamental theoretical congenialities between the Essex and the Tartu-Moscow School by analyzing the ontological statuses of “discourse” and “semiosphere.”
5.1.1 The Ontological Statuses of Discourse and Semiosphere

For Laclau, the discourse is not an object among many, but the primary terrain of objectivity as such (Laclau 2005a, p. 68). Laclau refers to Wittgenstein’s idea of “language game” (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 108; Laclau 2005a, p. 106) and, we should add, to Jacques Derrida’s notion of “undecidability” (see Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. xi; cf. Norval 2004, p. 142) when he characterizes his concept of “discourse.”

For Laclau, nothing is constituted outside the discourse. Yet this has nothing to do with the debate between realists and idealists. Laclau does not deny that earthquakes and other physical phenomena exist. But whether an earthquake is constituted in terms of the “wrath of God” or in terms of “natural disaster” depends on discursive structurations (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 108). So, the problem of the constitution of social and political reality becomes for Laclau the problem of the constitution of discourse.

Lotman would certainly agree with Laclau on the point that nothing is constituted outside the discourse and that this claim does not lead to denying the existence of the objects outside cognition. He never used this kind of vocabulary, though. But if we entrench carefully into his theoretical scheme, we can detect that what he calls “text,” “culture,” or “semiosphere” conceptualizes exactly the same ontological realm as does “discourse” in Laclau’s vocabulary: namely the primary terrain of objectivity as such. The best way to illustrate this very general congeniality would be to consider the problem of the discursive vs extra-discursive in Lotman’s terminology. What it comes down to is the problem of semiotic vs extra-semiotic reality. And as is the case with Laclau, the problematic part of the antithesis is the second one. At least two specifications need to be set forth concerning the extra-semiotic reality. First, the “extra-semiotic reality” is “extrinsic” only with respect to a given meaningful totality. “Extra-cultural” sphere often turns out to be a sphere of an alien culture and the “extra-semiotic” sphere, a sphere of alien semiosis (Lotman 2004c [1989], p. 646). In one of his last works Lotman even goes so far as to erase the notion of “extra-cultural” altogether and proposes to substitute it—at least in scientific vocabulary—with the notion of “other-cultural” (see Lotman 2002b [1992], pp. 235–236).

With the extra-semiotic world, the semiosphere has virtually no contacts, because outside the latter “semiosis itself cannot exist” (Lotman 2005b [1984], p. 208). Every contact with the space located outside
the semiosphere in question requires a prior semiotization of that space. Thus “the images of pre- or extra-semiotic that are interpolated to the outside world are very often created from within the given culture as its ideal anti-structure” [“Очень часто на внешний мир интерполируются представления о ‘естественности’ и до- или внесемиотичности, выработанные в недрах данной культуры как ее идеальная антиструктура”] (Lotman 2004b [1989], p. 646). Second, from this point of view the definition of culture as the sphere of organization (information) opposing disorganization (entropy), says, “that the sphere of extra-cultural non-organization may sometimes be constructed as a mirror reflection of the sphere of culture or else as a space which, from the position of an observer immersed in the given culture, appears as unorganized, but which from an outer position proves to be a sphere of different organization” (Ivanov et al. 1998, p. 35, italics by the authors). This implies, however, that the real outside world is an active participant in the semiosis and on its border with the semiosphere “numerous ‘mechanisms of metaphoric translation’ operate, ‘pumping’ to both directions the correspondingly transformed texts” [“в которой работают многочисленные механизмы ‘метафорического перевода’, ‘перекачивающие’ в обоих направлениях соответственно трансформированные тексты”] (Lotman 2004b [1989], p. 647). What it comes down to is that “from the position of an outside observer, culture will represent not an immobile, synchronically balanced mechanism, but a dichotomous system, the ‘work’ of which will be realized as the aggression of regularity against the sphere of the unregulated and, in opposite direction, as the intrusion of the unregulated into the sphere of organization” (Ivanov et al. 1998, p. 36). In that case, what we are dealing with is a complex and pulsating dialogue, not a one-directional reception. Returning to the example above, we could paraphrase it in the following manner: whether an earthquake is constituted in terms of the “wrath of God” or in terms of “natural disaster” depends on discursive structurations or semiotization, and the latter in turn depends on the “intrusion” of the earthquake into the sphere of those structurations.

Now, we can summarize from this reasoning a critical point concerning the semiosphere or culture: ultimately they are built up around an exclusion of disorganization or “extra-semiotic” and that those excluded forms: (a) are created by culture or semiosphere itself “as its ideal anti-structure”; and (b) their exclusion is not a one-directional and final act, but a constant
and potentially never-ending dialogue between the “excluded” and the “excluder.”

This point takes us further in our attempt to show the underlying congenialities between Lotman and Laclau because precisely the same logic could be found in Laclau’s conception of “constitutive antagonism.”

5.1.2 Exclusion as Constitutive Condition for Meaning-Making

We should indicate, first, that Laclau shares with Lotman the fundamental Saussurean idea that a signifying system, that is, semiosphere or discourse is a system of differences. And since every system of signification is essentially differential, its closure is the precondition of signification being possible at all (Laclau 1996a, p. 37). But any closure requires the establishment of limits, and no limit can be drawn without, simultaneously, positing what is beyond it.

A significant puzzle is related to the positing that, which is beyond the limits of the system of all differences (from the internal point of view). Laclau indicates that it is possible only through radical or antagonistic exclusion (ibid.). To put it in simpler terms: you have to exclude “them” radically or antagonistically in order to fully constitute “us” as a coherent system.

But an important thing for Laclau is that this exclusion operates through two contradictory logics: on the one hand, it makes possible the system of differences as a coherent totality; but, on the other hand, vis-à-vis the antagonistically excluded element, the differences that now form a totality are no longer merely different but also equivalent to each other. In other words, their identity that is based on their more or less clear difference from each other tends to be corrupted or subverted by their being also equivalent to each other (Laclau 2005a, p. 70).

This constitutes an insurmountable tension in any meaningful totality. Laclau coins a special vocabulary for conceptualizing this tension. He calls the discourse’s tendency to present its elements more equivalent than different “logic of equivalence”; the opposite tendency bears the label of “logic of difference.”

According to Laclau, there is an insurmountable tension between those logics in the constitution of every discourse and that leads him to conclude that discourse or systemic totality of differences is an “object” that is, at the same time, impossible and necessary. First, it is impossible, because there cannot be a final victory of one logic over the other: purely
differential discourse would be just meaningless noise or “discourse of the psychotic” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 112), and purely equivalential discourse would be just silence. And since the tension between those logics is insurmountable, there is no literal object corresponding to a discourse. It is in principle impossible to recognize the “True” or “Ultimate” meaning of whatever meaningful entity.

But the totality of discourse is not only an impossible object but also a necessary one: it has to be created because without that object there would be no signification whatsoever. As Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 112) put it: “The impossibility of an ultimate fixity of meaning implies that there have to be partial fixations – otherwise, the very flow of differences would be impossible. Even in order to differ, to subvert meaning, there has to be a meaning.”

But we can render the same point in terms of antagonistic exclusion: antagonistic exclusion can never be total since “total exclusion” (in the case of purely equivalential discourse) would be a contradiction in terms—hence Laclau prefers to talk about “radical” or “antagonistic” exclusion. But on the other hand, some exclusion is absolutely necessary, because otherwise there would be no basis for forming a system of differences because there would be no closure at all. (Of course, Laclau explicitly positions himself on the post-structuralist theoretical terrain that has rejected the idea of “transcendental signified” that could be a “natural” basis for systems of meaning [see Laclau 2001].) Thus, antagonism is seen to occur when “the presence of [an] Other prevents me from being totally myself. The relation arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 129). But it is noteworthy that for Laclau and Mouffe, the effect of antagonism is always mutual, as is, of course, evident from its constitutive character: “Insofar as there is antagonism, I cannot be a full presence for myself. But nor is the force that antagonises me such a presence: its objective being is a symbol of my non-being and, in this way, it is overflowed by a plurality of meanings which prevent it being fixed as a full positivity” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 129). So, we are back in the situation, very similar to the general constitution of semiosphere: something has to be created as an “outside” in order to achieve systematicity in the “inside.”

To be sure, Laclau tends in his 1990s works, to establish an even more general concept for indicating the tension or structural impossibility of every structure: namely that of “dislocation” (see Laclau 1990, pp. 39–41). Now, antagonism is no longer the one and only form of
creating the “outside” in order to constitute the “inside,” but “rather, it becomes one possible articulation amongst many” (Norval 2000, p. 223). This adds some complexity and plurality to his conception: “From this site, it becomes possible to think of social division in terms other than the ‘friend/foe’ relationship” (Norval 2000, p. 223, italics by the author). But this does not change the general point about the internal tension in any meaningful totality.

A fundamental question arises here, however: What are the forms of this “creation” that can elicit “closure” for a system? Laclau’s general answer—which will later be specified in more detail—is pretty clear: “Any ‘closure’ is necessarily tropological. This means that those discursive forms that construct a horizon of all possible representation [i.e. signification] within a certain context, which establish the limits of what is ‘sayable’ are going to be necessarily figurative” (Laclau 2006, p. 114). In other words: the discursive forms that have an ability to bring forth an artificial or constructed “victory” of one logic over the other are figurative.

Lotman would, again, certainly agree on that point with Laclau. According to him, there is always an inherent tension or antagonism in every meaningful system—a tension that can be temporarily overcome due to “a block of contingent equivalences, a metaphorogenous device that makes possible operations of translation in the conditions of untranslatability” [“блок условных эквивалентностей, метафороренное устройство, позволяющее осуществлять операцию перевода в ситуации непереводимости.”] (Lotman 2004b [1989], p. 641). What is this tension? And what about the problem of ‘translation’? Here too, Lotman speaks of two very fundamental categories—namely the “discrete” and “non-discrete” coding systems—for understanding the constitution of meaningful totalities, categories that bear very obvious “family resemblances” with Laclau’s idea of the two above-mentioned logics of difference and equivalence. But first, a few general remarks concerning the notion of “translation” and “untranslatability” in Lotman’s vocabulary.

5.1.3 The Notion of Translation in Cultural Semiotics

Where Laclau speaks of “articulation” as the practice through which unorganized elements are organized into a meaningful totality or discourse (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985, pp. 105–114), Lotman uses a more traditional term: “translation.” However, it is clear that “translation”
does not refer to “linguistic translation” in the narrow sense. We do not find Lotman’s name in the reference books on translation (see Salupere 2008). Yet at the same time, the notion of “translation” and concepts deeply entwined with it—re-coding, equivalence, and transformation—are at the center of Lotman’s cultural semiotic approach. It is vital at this moment to distinguish two different uses of the term “translation” in Lotman’s work. First, he uses the term in the classical literary scientific sense when he deals with the problems of structural poetics. But he also speaks of “translation” when he is referring to the phenomenon of culture and its dynamics in the general sense (Salupere 2008). We, of course, concentrate hereafter on the second sense of the term.

Lotman’s conception of translation as the source of cultural dynamics draws a clear distinction between the cultural semiotic approach and the classical structuralism. Whereas the latter conceived language as more primary compared to speech, for Lotman and the Tartu-Moscow School such a fundamental distinction was an impossibility—one cannot conceive language and speech separately. Generation of meaning (text, discourse) is not an automatic realization of language resources from one language into another, but a translation, a transition. Automatic realization would only be possible within artificial and monolingually coded languages, where the operations of text or message-transition are performed according to algorithmic rules. In that case, we would have a situation where changing the direction of the operation to the opposite would lead us back to the original message. “The transformations of texts would be reversible” [“Трансформации текста обратимы.”] (Lotman 2004a [1978], p. 569). Any deviance from the rules of language in the speech = text could be considered a reflection of the imperfectness of language. For Lotman, however, it is exactly the dynamic tension between different languages and texts that forms one very important condition for semiotic system as such, since he sees message as new, when it “does not emerge out of univocal transformations and therefore cannot be derived automatically from some initial text and according to pre-given transformation rules” [“которые не возникают в результате однозначных преобразований и, следовательно, не могут быть автоматически выведены из некоторого исходного текста путем приложения к нему заранее заданных правил трансформации”] (Lotman 2004a [1978], p. 569). The reversibility of text transformation is contrasted with un(re)translatability, symmetry with asymmetry. This, however, is exactly
the place where the problem of approximate or rhetoric translation—
translation in the situation of untranslatability—enters the major scene.

5.1.4 Bilingualism in Lotman and Laclau

According to Lotman, it is characteristic of all thinking mechanisms—
starting from the structure of the brain to the organization of culture in
all its levels—that they are heterogeneously structured. Every meaningful
structure consists “of (minimally) two semiotic mechanisms (languages),
which are mutually untranslatable and yet similar to each other, since
each models, with its own means, the same extra-semiotic reality [in
the sense elaborated above]” [“состоющую (минимально) из двух
семиотических механизмов (языков), находящихся в отношении
взаимной непереводимости и одновре-менно подобных друг другу,
поскольку каждый своими средствами модели-рует одну и ту же
Therefore, every meaningful totality is at least bilingual and this also
implies that semiotic meanings do not get their full constitution through
correspondence to some monolingually graspable “reality.” Lotman
defines language as “every system whose end is to establish communi-
cation between two or more individuals” (Lotman 1977 [1971], p. 7).
It is clear that his conception does not limit language to merely natural
languages. Lotman applies the term “language” also to customs, rituals,
commerce, art, religious concepts, etc. Lotman calls this kind of systems
secondary modeling systems, which “are constructed on the model of
language” (Lotman 1977 [1971], p. 9). This does not imply that they
reproduce all aspect of natural language (Lotman 1977 [1971], p. 9).

On the very fundamental level, Lotman speaks of “discrete” and
“non-discrete” (or “continuous”) coding systems (languages) that are
simultaneously active in modeling the “outside” or extra-semiotic reality.
According to him, the mutual untranslatability of those systems is due to
their fundamentally different structuring principles. In a discrete system,
“the basic bearer of meaning is the segment (= sign), while the text or
the chain of segments (= text) is secondary, its meaning being derived
from the meanings of the signs” (Lotman 2001 [1990], p. 36). In
the discrete coding system, the signs are linked to signs. Linear, causal,
logical, or chronological sequences characterize texts of this type (Lotman
2004a [1978], p. 572). In the continuous (or non-discrete) systems,
the primary bearer of meaning is the text “that does not dissolve into
signs, but is itself a sign or isomorphic to a sign. Here, not the rules of linking signs are active, but the rhythm and symmetry (or arrhythmia and asymmetry, respectively)” [“который не распадается на знаки, а сам является знаком или изоморфен знаку. Здесь активны не правила соединения знаков, а ритм и симметрия (соответственно аритмия и асимметрия)”] (Lotman 2004a [1978], p. 577). The sign is transformed into its other manifestations or becomes equivalent to the corresponding blur of meaning on some other level. Phenomena that appear different gain ability to become equivalent; various analogies, homomorphisms, and isomorphisms become possible that are characteristic to poetic texts and partly also to mathematic and philosophical texts (Lotman 2004a [1978], p. 572).

To summarize the argument thus far we could use Jakobson’s (1971 [1956], pp. 239–259) well-known distinction and say that in the discrete linkage the syntagmatic pole of language prevails, and in the case of non-discrete linkage the same holds for paradigmatic pole.

And this is a moment of our argument when we can draw a substantial parallel between Lotman and Laclau by using a quote from the most well-known work of the latter:

Taking a comparative example from linguistics, we could say that the logic of difference tends to expand the syntagmatic pole of language, the number of positions that can enter into a relation of combination and hence of continuity with one another; while the logic of equivalence expands the paradigmatic pole — that is, the elements that can be substituted for one another — thereby reducing the number of positions which can possibly be combined. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 130)

So, when we talk about “discrete coding system” in Lotman’s sense, we could as well talk about the “logic of difference” in Laclau’s sense, and vice versa. Of course, the same holds for the relation of the “non-discrete coding system” and the “logic of equivalence.” Not to mention the “impossible” yet “necessary” relation between the discrete/non-discrete and the different/equivalent.

And here a problem arises: How is this antagonism, dislocation, or tension between the two types of coding systems (temporarily) overcome? In fact, the situation is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, these two systems are mutually untranslatable. Yet, on the other hand, this bilingual antagonism is constitutive (as is the tension between the logic of difference
and that of equivalence in the formation of discourse in Laclau’s sense), because bilingualism is the condition for any thinking structure.

We can refer back to the aforementioned “block of contingent equivalences” or “metaphorogenous device.” We have explained the relation between Lotman’s “coding systems” and Laclau’s “logics,” and the presumption of “inevitable tension” involved in each conception. Now, it is time to sketch out the ways in which the overcoming of this tension is conceived.

5.1.5 Overcoming Bilingualism: “Empty Signifiers” and “Rhetoric Translation”

Lotman’s argument evolves out of his idea of “rhetoric translation.” The mechanism of rhetorical translation integrates the antithetic semiotic structures (the discrete and continuous coding systems) into a unified whole. This unity is necessary for translation to occur and produce positive results, despite the apparent impossibility of any translation (Lotman 2004a [1978], p. 573). As an elementary condition for semiotic communication, these antithetic tendencies have to disappear in a unified structural totality. Otherwise, any positive meaning-generation would be impossible. And it is important to notice that it is a two-way (and simultaneous) movement: the continuous text (= sign) is translated by way of setting the discrete units into regular sequences and the discrete sequences can also be conveyed through continuous texts (Lotman 2004a [1978]).

Due to the principally different structuring principle of the continuous and discrete coding systems, it cannot be the case of exact or precise translation here. The latter would require a one-to-one correspondence between the elements of the two systems enabling the projection of one system into the other. The discrete and exactly specified unit of one language is in the other language corresponded by a diffusively bounded blur of meaning transmuting gradually into another meaning (Lotman 2005a [1981], p. 406). In a situation like that we are dealing with no precise translation, but with “approximate equivalences determined by the cultural-psychological and semiotic context common to both systems” (Lotman 2001 [1990], p. 37).

Laclau, as we mentioned, explicitly presumes figurative discursive constructions for overcoming the tension between the logic of equivalence and difference. Explaining this figural construction, he coins the category of “empty signifier” (Laclau 1996a, pp. 36–46). The idea is
roughly this: in the formation of discourse the differences lose their identity based on differentiality—in other words: the signifiers that form the discourse tend to get emptier and emptier from the point of view of their specific meaning. This emptying of the signifier takes place through the proliferation of different meanings that are attributed to it (Laclau 1996b). For heuristic reasons, Laclau differentiates between the “empty” and the “floating” signifiers, indicating that the status of getting emptier is the status of floating (Laclau 1996b). But some signifiers tend to get emptier than others. Of course, in practice, no signifier can lose its differential meaning altogether, yet Laclau’s idea is that the one that does it the most—the so-called empty signifier—can also, in some circumstances, represent the discourse as a whole and incarnate the totality of the whole system of differences, providing this way the closure for the system.

When Lotman speaks of “cultural-psychological and semiotic context common to both systems” that might determine the result of the translation from discrete into non-discrete (or vice versa), a natural question arises concerning Laclau: Is there any mechanism that might determine which of the signifiers in the discourse assumes the function of “empty signifier”? Laclau’s answer is that assuming this function cannot be determined a priori, but is constituted through contingent articulation. If it could be determined a priori, the relation between the empty signifier and all the other differences would be a conceptual relation: a relation where the empty signifier would express a common core of all the particular differences belonging to the discourse. But that is precisely what Laclau denies (see Laclau 2006, pp. 108–109), since in the case of conceptual relations there would be no place for contingent articulations. The relationship between the empty signifier and the discourse as a totality is the relationship between a name and an object (Laclau 2006, p. 109). In other words, the empty signifier is nothing other than a signifier that has become a name for a discourse (the whole chain of signifiers). So, we have to deal here briefly with the general problem between the relationship of names and objects from Laclau’s perspective.

How are names and objects related to each other? Laclau takes here a radically anti-descriptivist stance (Laclau 2005a, pp. 101–110; 2006, p. 109). Anti-descriptivism, as it stems from the works of Saul Kripke, holds that naming does not involve any conceptual mediation but is a primary baptism through which a name is assigned to an object (see Kripke 1980). But Laclau with his references to Slavoj Žižek (1989) goes even further and asserts that the object is not something pre-given, not
something that a name can be assigned to. Instead, the unity or identity of an object is the *retroactive* result of naming it. Objects are (so to speak) created through naming. The name is the ground for the thing, not the other way round. This radical anti-descriptivism would be entirely incomprehensible from self- or inter-actionalist perspective that would presume name and an object named to be given outside the name-object relation and their relation to be causal in nature. From the viewpoint of transactionalism naming is a constitutive relation whose constituent elements can be considered separately, but not as being separate. We will come to the issue of constitutive explanation in Chapter 7. Now, however, this constitutive theory of naming (radical anti-descriptivism) leads logically to Laclau’s central notion—to that of hegemony as a form of *contingent* articulation of social and political meanings.

5.1.6 Naming as a Hegemonic Operation in Laclau and Lotman

It should be clear that the function of Lotman’s mechanism of “rhetorical translation” is analogous to the one attributed to the *general* category of “empty signifier” in Laclau’s conception: it links the different signifiers into a chain of equivalence. And through that operation, the signifiers lose their differential identity and become dominated by the logic of equivalence. Now that we have explained that, it is time, however, to ask a crucial question: What is for Laclau the purpose of this category of empty signifier for political analysis? The answer could be framed easily: it is the most fundamental tool for conceptualizing hegemonic relations. Namely, from the researcher’s point of view, a hegemonic relation is nothing other than the situation where a particular signifier has assumed the status of an empty signifier. In other words, it is an articulation, which requires that a particular signifier without entirely losing its particularity becomes a universal representative of the signifying system as a whole (Laclau 2005a, p. 70).

But as we have explained the very same relationship in terms of names, we could say according to Laclau, that a hegemonic relation is nothing other than a situation where a concrete and particular signifier functions as a name for an entire chain of signifiers. This means that the problem of naming is at the center of Laclau’s theory of discourse and hegemony. Through the act of naming, the hegemonic relations are established. And the study of naming strategies is of utmost importance for political analysis. For example: names like, “war on terror” or “struggle against
fascism,” function as *grounds* for certain political discourses—not just as some ancillary labels. They, of course, change the differential nature of signifiers that might end up being part of the corresponding discourses.

Given our purposes in this chapter, our next logical step would be to ascertain that the same general logic concerning the problem of “naming” could be found in Lotman’s work. Now, when we use Lotman’s vocabulary for conceptualizing hegemonic relations, we should first specify that in the *formation* of hegemonic discourse (or hegemonic semiosphere for that matter) there prevails the *non-discrete* strategy of “rhetoric translation.” It means that discrete and clearly differentiated signs are translated into non-discrete totality. “The main feature of such a world is universal resemblance of everything to everything; the main organizing structural relation that of homomorphism” [“Универсальным законом такого мира является подобие всего всему, основное организующее структурное отношение — отношение гомео-морфизма”] (Lotman 2004b [1973], p. 570). In other words, the identity of the former discrete elements is more or less transformed. This continuous translating strategy “makes one see manifestations of the One phenomenon in the various phenomena of the real world, and observe the One Object behind the diversity of objects of the same type” [“заставляет видеть в разнообразных явлениях реального мира знаки Одного явления, а во всем разнообразии объектов одного класса рассматривать Единый Объект”] (Lotman 2004b [1978], p. 571). Since we indicated that the function of “rhetoric translation” is analogous to that of “empty signifier,” the second specification we should make now has to do with the problem of “naming.”

Naming is a crucial problem for Lotman too, and we can refer to our early work that dealt with it in this political context in more detail (see Selg and Ventsel 2008) and saw naming as one of the major strategies for constructing the political discourse. The name would have a function of primary translation, since as soon as the *outside* world (and that can also be a world that is coded in some *other* language, coding system, discourse, or semiosphere) is set forth, “it is already *named*, that is, it is semiotized at least on the surface level” [“он уже назван, то есть хотя бы поверхностно семиотизирован”] (Lotman 2004b [1989], p. 646). The meaning of the name can function as a representation of a continuous totality or in the extreme case—it can *become* that totality. This extreme case, as is observed by
Lotman, is the logic of *mythological* naming or identification: “Mythological identification is in principle non-textual in character, emerging from the inseparability of the name and object. What may be at stake in such cases is not substitution of equivalent names, but transformation of the object itself” [“Мифологическое отождествление имеет принципиально внектекстовый характер, выраста на основе неотделимости названия от вещи. При этом речь может идти не о замене эквивалентных названий, а о трансформации самого объекта”] (Lotman 2004d [1973], p. 541). In Laclau’s sense, it would be a case of not just equivalence between the name and the object it names, but a one of identity. In such a case, the altering of the name would imply altering the object that is named.

At the other extreme, we could imagine the act of naming a completely discrete unit. That would be a completely conventional naming. In that case, no transformation takes place in the object when its name is changed into something else.

In neither of the extremes is politics or hegemony possible, because “We have an end of politics when the community conceived as a totality [the object], and the will representing that totality [the name], become indistinguishable from each other. [That would be the case of mythological naming in Lotman’s sense] In that case […] politics is replaced by administration and the traces of social division disappear” (Laclau 2005b, p. 48). And “the asymmetry between community as a whole and collective wills is the source of that exhilarating game that we call politics, from which we find our limits but also our possibilities” (Laclau 2005b, p. 49). In other words, there is a dialectics between mythological and conventional naming that makes politics possible.

### 5.1.7 The Forces “Behind” Naming

So, we could say that naming would be a very central category for conceptualizing politics for both Laclau and Lotman. But is that all that politics is about? This question for Laclau is actually a question concerning the forces behind these operations that enable naming to be the ground for discourse.

Laclau’s answer draws mostly from Lacanian psychoanalytic conceptions of affect, desire, and drive (Laclau 2005a, pp. 112–117). And this is the point where our view starts to distance itself from that of Laclau. We try to explain why by not so much through criticizing his relevant views
per se, but rather through dismissing them by substituting the underlying categories of those views with Lotman’s cultural semiotic concepts, which, we believe, serve better our empirically oriented aims than the Lacanian categories. To be sure, we do not develop a full-fledged argument for this dismissal and we do not think that there can be any final “refutation” of psychoanalysis (or of any general ontological stance, for that matter). We can only indicate a couple of points in favor of discharging psychoanalysis from Laclau’s framework. First, Laclau’s recourse to psychoanalysis tends to be utterly unnecessary—he did not need the Lacanian logics of affect, desire, and objet petit a for conceptualizing hegemonic relations. In fact, paradoxically, he could be read as admitting it himself when he reaches the conclusion “that logic of the objet petit a and the hegemonic logic are not just similar: they are simply identical!” (Laclau 2005a, p. 116, italics added). Since those logics are identical, we can manage with either of them and remove the psychoanalytic basis without doing any conceptual damage to Laclau’s research program concerning the logic of discourse. Grounding a general ontology of hegemony with another identical general ontology (Lacanian psychoanalysis) does not add any new quality to his model. What it can do, however, is present this second identical ontology in the guise of explanation, since it might seem to be possible to explain everything with recourse to unconscious and unobservable desires, affects, and drives. What interests us is a theoretical model that could provide tools for empirical research and at the same time does not, in its reconstructions of hegemonic logics, postulate a realm which is by definition empirically unobservable as an explanatory ground. The latter remark does not indicate that it is certain semiotic behaviorism we are looking for—we are far from equating “observation” with “measurement.” We just want to clarify the question of how hegemonic formations are constituted in more detail without closing opportunities for their scrutiny with resorting to all-explaining answers to the question of why they are constituted. And a key to the expansion of this how-question could be found in Lotman’s cultural semiotics. If we replace the Lacanian vocabulary in Laclau’s framework with Lotman’s theory at the core of which is the notion of communication understood in terms of translation, we could develop a useful tool for conceptualizing different political communications and hegemonies.

Second, the more profound reason for dismissing psychoanalysis stems from the fact that in his later writings when Laclau tends increasingly to ground his view on hegemony with psychoanalysis, it leads him to
conceive politics proper as fundamentally “fetishistic” activity. Kaplan summarizes Laclau’s latter position concerning the “empty signifiers” as follows:

In psychoanalytic terms, the emergence of such an empty signifier corresponds to an affective “radical investment” that confers on it “the dignity of the Thing”—that is, of an object which, in standing in for the constitutively missing “true” object of desire, comes to function directly as that object... Politically, this description is meant to account for the identity-forming power of hegemonic signifiers. (Kaplan 2010, p. 260)

But as Kaplan points out: “[i]n classical Marxian terms, empty signifiers are fetishes that derive their efficacy from collective belief in their reality and that consequently confront the believers as apparently objective and independent powers” (ibid., italics added). This “fetishism” at the core of Laclau’s notion of hegemony creates several difficulties for the conceptualization of the relation between hegemony and democratic pluralism which was of central importance for the project of “radical democracy” outlined in Laclau and Mouffe (1985, ch. 4). Since as Kaplan continues: “whereas Marx wishes to abolish fetishism by exposing its origins in material processes, for Laclau this fetishistic mediation is constitutive of the social as such—there is neither society nor materiality without some ungrounded investment in a fetishized signifier” (ibid., italics added). In fact, this “fetishism of the category of totality” (Wenman 2003, pp. 590, 601) which presumes the hegemonic construction of a universal (“empty signifier”) that dominates over the particularities and subverts their identity and this way creates a discourse as a totality has been considered a major shortcoming of Laclau’s work concerning the possibilities for conceptualizing democratic pluralism (ibid.). The impasse seems to be the following: hegemony, with its evident monistic characteristics in Laclau’s conceptualization, seems to be undemocratic or antithetic to pluralism by definition. This tension between hegemony and democracy is recognized already in Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 189): “no hegemonic project can be based exclusively on a democratic [pluralist] logic, but must also consist of a set of proposals for the positive organization of the social.” In other words: each hegemonic project attempts to close the discourse through exclusion and dominance and this is antithetical to democratic pluralism. There is, however, a way out of this impasse.
Put very simply: the tendencies toward pluralism or closedness (discreteness/difference or continuity/equivalence) in the translation strategies of forming a discourse should be taken for what they are—tendencies. As already pointed out, every discourse is bilingual and there is an inherent tension in the formation of meaning between these two tendencies. The question of the relation between democracy and hegemony boils down to the question of how this tension is resolved. And this “fetishistic” or “mythological” resolution that Laclau in his later works seems to be viewing as a defining feature of politics as such should, in fact, be located within the framework of what in Chapter 7 is identified as “authoritarian” or even “totalitarian” form of hegemony/political communication associated with phatic and emotive communication.4

5.2 From Congenialities to Fruitful Complements: Expanding the Dialogue

The theoretical analysis thus far had the purpose of demonstrating the congenialities between Lotman and Laclau in order to provide a non-arbitrary basis for bringing those thinkers together. We started with the relationship between the notions of discourse and semiosphere (culture); moved on to the general “logics” or “coding systems”; then through juxtaposing the categories of “empty signifier” and “rhetoric translation” we concluded that the operation of “naming” is of central importance for both Laclau and Lotman for potential conception of hegemony. These were the congenialities. Now, we are at the stage of drawing out the main complements that can be made to Laclau’s conception of hegemony in terms of Lotman’s cultural semiotics.

5.2.1 Naming Is but One Hegemonic Strategy

Since we dismissed the categories underlying Laclau’s answer concerning the forces “behind” names, we should pose the same kind of question to Lotman’s theory: Is naming the only strategy of “rhetoric translation”? And the answer is, of course, “no.” The potential “forces” behind naming are to be found in Lotman’s general conception of translation strategies.

Though naming is far from being the only translation strategy that characterizes political or hegemonic practice, it could be conceived as a primary strategy in the sense that it functions as the most fundamental suture of a hegemonic discourse: a discourse that is generally
identified by a single name is obviously more continuous, stable and less open to analytic criticism than a discourse identified by many signifiers, whether names or others. But hegemonic practice is always constructed as a bilingual system. Its main specificity consists in the tendency toward translating discrete elements into a non-discrete totality in the Lotmanian sense or difference into the chain of equivalence in the Laclauian sense. We could say, from the researcher’s point of view, that every hegemonic practice strives to be identified—in the long run—by a single name that is the ground for the continuity of its identity. But this endeavor toward hegemony has many steps, stages, drawbacks, and of course, it is never final. To put it again in terms of researcher’s point of view: there exist a great many translation strategies between the two extremes—the purely conventional and the purely mythological naming—that could be conceptualized as hegemonic practices.

This conceptualizing would also provide some basis for dealing with ways of how the heterogeneous phenomena are articulated into a hegemonic totality and how they lose their particular content through this articulation into a relation of equivalence. Offhand it seems obvious that different elements of the chain of equivalence are articulated differently. Nevertheless, the mere contention that through equivalence the particular contents lose their identity says nothing specific about the logic of that transformation. But handling this problem seems to be one of the most important tasks for empirical political analysis. In fact, the problem of that transformation has been an explicitly addressed problem among the Essex school as well, mostly in terms of a need for specification of different types of hegemony or modalities of political identity. The starting point for one of the most important trajectories for future research consists of the theoretical clarification “of the relation between the logic of hegemonic practice and particular forms of political regime. For instance, in what way do democratic and authoritarian forms of hegemony differ?” (Norval 2000, p. 229). Since Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, the general hint for addressing the question of the differentia specifica of democratic hegemony has in one way or the other been associated with the notion of pluralism that is contrasted with authoritarian monism. “The roots of authoritarian practice,” for Laclau and Mouffe,
representation and recognises that the identity and interests of social agents are the result of contingent articulatory practices. (Norval 2000, p. 229; cf Laclau and Mouffe 1985, pp. 55–58)

But the theoretical, as well as analytical tools for studying different hegemonic discourses from the viewpoint of their typology, remains under-theorized: “It is clear that the conceptualisation of hegemony offered here... is neutral with respect to the type of hegemony instituted” (Norval 2000, p. 231). So, “while discourse theory provides us with a sophisticated conceptualisation of the decision inaugurating politics, further reflection is needed on the bridging of the gap between the moment of hegemonic institution tout court, and the institution of a particular regime, such as a democracy” (ibid.). Some clues for these future reflections are proposed through Derrida’s notion of the ethical or reintroduction of the original “Gramscian discussion of hegemony as a practice of ethico-political leadership and with it the normative aspect of the concept” (ibid.), but our intention is to grasp the problem in terms of aforementioned “translation strategies.” Democratic social or hegemonic formation could, in our view, be specified as a discourse in which there is a predomination of discrete translation strategy: in other words, in a democratic political context, the signifiers (events, speeches, programs, even, for instance, the identities of politicians, etc.) that circulate in the public communication, tend to retain their discrete identity and not to be blurred through inscription into a continuous whole, that could be identified through very limited set of signifiers (at the extreme case: through only one signifier, for instance, the name of the leader, party, or program). This, of course, implies that the fewer signifiers are there to be identified as the grounds for a discourse the less democratic (in the pluralist sense at least) this discourse could be considered. Or to put it in the vocabulary elaborated here: the more continuous (or mythological) is a political discourse, the less democratic it is. It is important to point out that there is no contradiction with the definition of hegemonic translation strategy given above since an absolute hegemony of one political force would be—theoretically, but never completely in practice—possible only in an absolute totalitarian regime. On the other hand, our conceptualization coincides with the “common sense” among political scientist that when a political force wins an election with too vast a majority, it gives reasonable grounds for suspecting a deficiency of democracy in a corresponding regime. But our aim is not to limit this insight to merely
electoral processes, but to political or public communication in general, and to provide some tools for assessment of different types of political communication in terms of their discreteness or continuity. And that is a reason why we think the Tartu-Moscow School of semiotics could be of service here, since Lotman has developed several subtypes of translation strategies for both discrete and continuous types coding, and those could, in our view, be adapted for political analysis from the semiotic point of view. We will try to concretize our intention by way of giving examples of detailed analysis in Chapter 8. But before that, some brief additional remarks are of necessity concerning the notion of “text” in the context of Lotman’s work.

5.2.2 Lotman’s Notion of “Text” as a Potential Basis for a Typology of Hegemony

The notion of text as it is developed by Lotman and the Tartu-Moscow School could give some useful clues for political analysis because the latter is as basic a concept for the cultural semiotics as is the concept of discourse for Laclau and the Essex school. We believe, though, that the latter is under-theorized compared to the notion of text by Lotman.

It should be clear that text is not a work (or piece or opus) of something—it is a wider concept. Text has to be expressed in signs, yet not everything that is materially expressed in signs is relevant for text as a meaningful totality (Lotman 1977 [1971], pp. 50–56). In the context of artistic text—that could in principle be generalized to texts in general—we could refer to Lotman’s observation that “the extra-textual bonds of a work can be described as the relations between the set of elements fixed in the text and the set of elements from which any given element in the text is selected” (Lotman 1977 [1971], p. 50).

We should mention some of the main characteristics of text: its boundedness, heterogeneity, and hierarchy. In light of those features, the text ceases to be a simple message. In addition to the capacity to condense information, the text acquires a memory: it does not merely convey information that has been inscribed into it from the outside, but also transforms the messages and develops new ones (Lotman 2001 [1990], pp. 11–19). This makes the social-communicative function of text more complex. Besides the functions of conveying information, of creativity and memory, text operates as a mediator of cultural memory between the auditorium and the cultural tradition in which the information stored in
the text actualizes some parts of the common cultural memory, simultaneously leaving other aspects of it into oblivion. Moreover, in the course of communication the consumer of text does not only communicate with the text but with itself as well—the text helps to rebuild the personality of the reader, alter its structural self-orientation and its connection with the meta-cultural constructions (Lotman 2002a [1981], pp. 158–162). The latter aspect is important when the discursive formation of the political subjects is at stake.

5.3 **Cultural Semiotics and the Study of Communication**

Our sometimes overly technical exposition and synthesis of Laclau’s and Lotman’s (or the Essex and the Tartu-Moscow Schools’) position in this chapter actually boils down to a central claim: despite different labels the central categories of the Essex school of discourse theory (discourse, logic of difference and equivalence; empty signifiers, articulation, antagonism dislocation) and those of the Tartu-Moscow School of semiotics (text/semiosphere, discrete and continuous coding, rhetorical translation, untranslatability) play exactly the same functional role in both theories, enabling a mutual complementation of each other. We are not arguing that the theories are identical—this would make their combination entirely fruitless. We have already highlighted that although the conceptual edifice of both theoretical frameworks is equivalent, it is the crucial contribution of the Essex school to highlight that the logic of the semiosphere is, in fact, a political logic: translating discrete elements into a continuous whole through naming is precisely what has been characterized as hegemonic operation. The Tartu-Moscow School has a more general notion of rhetoric translation, translation at the condition of untranslatability through which those continuous wholes are created. But in addition, cultural semiotics has always highlighted in tune with modern culturology “that there is an organic link between culture and communication. A consequence of this is that models and terms taken from communication theory are being transferred to culture” (Lotman 2001, p. 20). Of course, culture in the Tartu-Moscow vocabulary is one of the more traditional synonyms for the semiosphere, and thus we can speak of organic relation between semiosphere and communication or even conceptualize semiosphere as a field of communication. This is an aspect that is under-theorized in the equivalent notion of
“discourse” in the Essex tradition and is the major addition we provide to their framework. It is important that the Tartu-Moscow School takes over the model of communication developed by Roman Jakobson (1960) with his distinction between six components of communication (addressee, addressee, message, contact, context, and code) and the six communicative/language functions depending on the major orientation of communication (emotive, conative, poetic, phatic, referential, and metalingual). However, what Lotman brings in is the notion of “auto-communication” which provides a form of dynamism in communication model that is somewhat missing in Jakobson, who is usually associated with the structuralist movement in semiotics. We will untangle the details of Jakobson’s model in the next chapter where we put forth semiotic theory of the political and pave the way for political semiotic methods for studying power, governance, and democracy (detailed in Chapter 7) and their underlying abductive logic of research and constitutive explanation (detailed in Chapter 8). Here we want to stress that it is of vital importance in our further exposition that Jakobson’s communication model, which we use for conceptualizing the political, is not read in the self-actionalist structuralist manner, but as a form trans-actional model that presumes the elements of communication to be constituted within the process of communication. We briefly explicate this in the current chapter by discussing Lotman’s notion of autocommunication. But before that, we propose an even more radical background for our argument: namely that it is possible to (re)read Saussure as a trans-actional communication theorist. In order to do that we turn to “neostructuralism” proposed by Risto Heiskala in his monograph Society as Semiosis (2003), which is thus far the most comprehensive study on the potential of semiotics for the social sciences.

5.3.1 Taking Stock from Neo-Structuralism: Saussurean Semiology as Trans-Actionalist Communication Theory

Heiskala’s rereading of Saussure starts with pointing out that structuralism, “is just one possible research program built on Course [in General Linguistics], but by no means the only one” (Heiskala 2003, p. 149). Heiskala has been developing what he calls “neostructuralism,” an approach that sets out to introduce semiotic tradition to social sciences and at the same time avoids the extremes of structuralist as well as post-structuralist interpretations of that tradition. Especially useful, in
our view, is that he reconstructs Saussure as providing a research program for the social sciences that is as methodologically rigorous as structuralist code theory on the one hand but at the same time avoids objectification of structures “without the objectification itself being objectified” (Heiskala 2003, p. 149, referring to Bourdieu’s [1990] expression). The presumed target audience for our book is also the community of social scientists. As we have seen through the examples of Foucault, Bourdieu, and others in the previous chapter, dismissal of semiotic tradition as “structuralist” is commonplace for this community, even for those have thoroughly relational perspective on social reality. We could add that during the process of this dismissal hardly anyone takes issue with anyone else of the semiotic tradition than its “founding fathers.” Therefore, in our view, there might be a better chance at communicating the point to the social scientists that semiotics is not a satellite of structuralism if we question even the inevitability of structuralism at the very origins of semiotics, not only at its recent developments (such as the works of Lotman). And it is here that Heiskala’s reading of Saussure is, in our view, of special relevance—even if it contradicts the bulk of text-books and authoritative views on the same subject. In what follows we will elaborate, via Heiskala, three fundamental ideas for semiotics originating from Saussure and put forward a working definition of semiotics for this book (which does not preclude other possible definitions for other research tasks).

1. **Semiotics is primary the study of institutions/social facts related to the arbitrariness of the meaning of signs.** According to Saussure “a sign is the combination of a concept [signified] and a sound pattern [signifier]” (Saussure 1983, p. 67). For him, the primary object of study of semiology is “the class of systems based upon the arbitrary nature of the sign” (ibid., 68). This means that semiology is deemed to be a social science since as Heiskala puts it, the “arbitrariness is related to the existence of social facts” (Heiskala 2003, p. 168). This is among other things evident from the fundamentally relational view of meaning informing the whole Saussurean tradition (post-structuralists included). The relational view holds that signs do not have meaning in themselves but only within a system of signs, i.e., in relation to other signs belonging to the system. This is why the Saussurean conception boils down to the view that the meaning of each sign is conceivable only as a relative value. In a well-known analogy to chess (Saussure 1983, pp. 88–89) where the pieces have no value in themselves but only through their relative position in the system of chess as a whole, the signs, in general, do not just receive their meaning only
through “the combination of a certain sound and a certain concept. To think of a sign as nothing more would be to isolate it from the system to which it belongs” (Saussure 1983, p. 112). Such “isolational” view “would be to suppose that a start could be made with individual signs, and a system constructed by putting them together” (ibid.). This would be the logical positivist view of meaning influential in the analytic philosophy of the first half of the twentieth century. For Saussure “the system as a united whole is the starting point, from which it becomes possible, by process of analysis, to identify its constituent elements” (ibid.). However, if we take into account the fact that by its nature, signs are arbitrary in the sense that no relation between the signifier and the signified is necessary, then it becomes clear why social relations are fundamental for fixing the relative values of signs:

the arbitrary nature of the sign enables us to understand more easily why it needs social activity to create a linguistic system. A community is necessary to establish values. Values have no other rationale than usage and general agreement. An individual, acting alone, is incapable of establishing a value. (Saussure 1983, pp. 111–112)

According to Heiskala “[s]uch a perspective brings institutions in the center of semiology” (Heiskala 2003, p. 168). And by “institutions” we could via Heiskala have in mind the roughly Durkheimian sense as “all the beliefs and all the modes of conduct instituted by collectivity” (Durkheim 1938, p. lvi), since “[t]he second name by which Durkheim calls these institutions is social facts” (Heiskala 2003, p. 183). And this brings us to the second fundamental idea for semiotics that has to do with the methodological guidelines for conceptualizing those institutions/social facts and meaning in general.

2. Linguistics is the model for semiotic methodology. The reason why “linguistics can serve as a model for the semiological study of other meaning systems” (Heiskala 2003, p. 168) is that linguistic signs according to Saussure are “entirely arbitrary” and hence “convey better than others the ideal semiological process” (Saussure 1983, p. 68). “In this sense, linguistics serves as a model for the whole of semiology, even though languages represent only one type of semiological system” (ibid., italics added). This provides the general methodological guideline for Saussurean semiotics as summarized by Heiskala: “the arbitrariness of the sign, the structure as a form and not a substance, the determination of the
identity of a sign as a relational value, and the syntagmatic and associative
relations, for example, are relevant not only in linguistics but in semiology
as well” (Heiskala 2003, p. 169). This leads us to the third fundamental
idea of semiotics.

3. Semiotics is the study of communication as contingent articulation
of meaning. As Saussure points out, semiology “would form part
of social psychology, and hence general psychology” and “it is for
the psychologist to determine the exact place of semiology” (Saussure 1983,
p. 16). On the whole Saussure “saw that natural spoken language is a
form of communication where the communicative faculty is based on an
ability to carry meaning by sound. Secondly, for him, the principal task of
linguistics was precisely to concentrate on the study of language as a form
which makes communication possible” (Heiskala 2003, p. 149). There-
fore, semiotics is first and foremost the study of communication. But it is
important that the latter is not viewed in terms of mechanistic encoding-
decoding terms usually associated with Saussure (cf. Harris 1987). At the
heart of this mechanistic-static depicting of Saussure’s notion of commu-
nication is the view that for him, the sender and the receiver use identical
code. Heiskala points out that Saussure in fact “did not say that the codes
used by different people are identical, but that they are ‘for all practical
purposes the same as the next person’s’” (Heiskala 2003, p. 173, citing
Saussure 1983, p. 13). This indicates that the identical-code interpreta-
tion of Saussurean model of communication “does not present it as the
only alternative” (Heiskala 2003, p. 173). In addition, Saussure remarks
that (1) “the language is never complete in any single individual, but exists
perfectly only in the collectivity” (Saussure 1983, p. 13) and (2) that the
“linguistic structure might be described as the domain of articulations”
and that “every linguistic sign is a part or member, an articulus, where
an idea is fixed in a sound, and a sound becomes the sign of an idea”
(ibid., p. 111). These remarks pave the way for Heiskala to interpret Saus-
sure in a manner that “allows us to benefit from the structuralist analysis
of language and other cultural structures and yet to maintain a dynamic
view on language” (Heiskala 2003, pp. 176–177). A key here is that “for
Saussure, the articulation of signs in a linguistic structure seems to be,
first of all, both a psychological process and a social one and, secondly,
both an ontological description of how a language works and a method-
ological position which reflects a certain linguistic approach to language”
(Heiskala 2003, p. 174). Hence, it is possible for Heiskala to distinguish
between “langue as cultural structures such as they actually exist in the
social process and *langue* as codes or discursive representations given to these cultural structures” (Heiskala 2003, p. 176). “**Langue as cultural structures**” is nothing other than a “social fact’ or a ‘linguistic institution’” (Heiskala 2003, p. 177). Interpreting the latter through Samuel Weber’s (1987) concept of “instituting process” Heiskala maintains that “linguistic institution and all other cultural structures can be understood as a process, where the articulation and rearticulation of sign relations takes place continuously” (Heiskala 2003, p. 177). Through this notion we can delimit different degrees of stability of cultural structures: “Within this institution there are sign relations which are highly stabile, such as are less stabile and such as are in a state of constant rearticulation” (ibid.).

This way, we can reinterpret the langue/parole relation as “one of mutual dependence” (ibid.). Thus each “act of *parole* would only be able to signify on the basis of the articulations of *langue*. At the same time, every act of *parole* would also be an act of reproduction and transformation of *langue*” (ibid.).

Having thus distanced from the identical-code interpretation of Saussurean view of communication, it is important to point out that methodologically speaking: “To make solid codes hold in the study of language, one is forced to stop the flow of time. This is the only way to halt the play of differences for study. Hence the [Saussurean] absolute distinction between diachronic and synchronic perspectives” (Heiskala 2003, p. 178). Yet, contrary to a usual interpretation of this distinction: “It is a proposition which presents itself to the researcher of language, a guiding principle in his work when he goes about his business of preparing coded representations of cultural structures. It is not an ontological postulate” (ibid.). Especially important for the discussion below is that such interpretation of Saussure which considers structures as social facts but at the same time rejects the assumption of their identity highlights “contingency as a central aspect of communication” (ibid.).

If it is considered that the condition of success for an event of communication is that meanings which are identical “for all practical purposes” are transferred between the sender and the receiver, then the success of communication is left dependent on whether the receiver and the sender have sufficiently similar articulations at their disposal (ibid.).

**Trans-actional definition of semiotics.** Now that we have considered the three fundamental ideas for semiotics let us entertain a definition of the latter for the purposes of this book. Based on the three fundamental ideas just discussed we put forward the following: *semiotics is research
based on a linguistic methodology that studies institutions/social facts related to the arbitrariness of the meanings of signs that are contingently articulated in communication. It is crucial to highlight here again that the primary aim of bringing in the more detailed discussion of Heiskala’s interpretation of Saussure was to call to attention the possibility that structuralism is only one, and in many ways, contingent development based on the Saussurean outlook. Instead, it highlights the contingency of articulation and communication at the heart of Saussure’s contribution. Of course, our point is not that Saussure had it all or that we should not go beyond Saussure. For instance, though we highlighted articulation and contingency and questioned the identical-code view of communication usually associated with Saussure, we would not deny that his model of communication is very abstract and needs further development—a subject taken up in the following chapters. Highlighting these aspects as well as relating Saussure’s enterprise with social facts is important for translating the tradition of semiotics into the vocabulary of social sciences—for which the question of social change and agency (usually related to the contingency of structures) are of crucial importance.

5.3.2 Cultural Semiotics as a Trans-Actional Study of Communication

Lotman has developed a cultural semiotic perspective that considers the elements of communication—language, context, addressee, and addressee—as being constituted within communication. In other words, he puts forth a perspective that tries to theorize what was under-theorized by Bakhtin with his notion of dialogue. Contemporary cultural semiotician Mikhail Lotman brings out that within the framework of the Tartu-Moscow School, the elements of communication do not exist a priori or prior to the communicative act. They emerge through communication. At the same time, there is no communication outside these elements (Lotman 2012, p. 172). Both mutually presuppose each other and mutually constitute each other, in a relational situation of communication. That is why we can consider the Tartu-Moscow School’s approach to be trans-actional. It would be accurate to say within this framework that communication does not emerge out of pre-given unity, but rather, it creates a certain unity. Communication creates “me” in the “other” and “other” in “me” (Lotman 2012, p. 173). Thus, communication from the
A FRAMEWORK OF POLITICAL SEMIOTICS: POLITICAL LOGIC ...

A cultural semiotic point of view is constitutive of the elements of communication. One of the mechanisms for explicating this is the notion of “autocommunication.”

According to Lotman, cultural communication can, in general, be dominated by two basic tendencies. Firstly, there is outwardly directed communication which aims to transfer the sender’s views (message) and to find the broadest possible intersection with other semiotic unities (I-he/she type of communication). Secondly, there is inwardly oriented communication which can be treated as autocommunication (i.e., I-I type of communication) (Lotman 2001, p. 21). In actual communication situations, these types appear as intermingled, but on an analytical level, it is possible to distinguish the domination of either the former or the latter type (Lotman 2001, p. 35). Lotman stresses that autocommunicative processes can primarily be observed in larger socio-cultural systems, e.g., at the level of a national community (Lotman 2001, p. 73). Thus, it is useful to analyze the categories of “I” and “s/he” also on a more abstract level than an individual. According to Lotman (2001, p. 22), “[i]n the ‘I-I’ system the bearer of the information remains the same but the message is reformulated and acquires new meaning during the communication process. This is the result of introducing a supplementary, second, code; the original message is recoded into elements of its structure and thereby acquires features of a new message.”

The information is reformulated in new structural categories. In “I-I” communication there is a qualitative transformation of the system, the restructuring of the “I” itself (Lotman 2001, pp. 22, 28–29). Thanks to the new code, it is possible to understand the previously known information from a novel perspective. Lotman points out that “[a]lthough the secondary code aims to liberate the primary signifying elements from their normal semantic values, this does not happen. The normal semantic values remain but secondary meanings are imposed on them […].” Those secondary meanings are created by the semantic shifts that happen when a new code is reformulating and renewing the status of the previously known message (Lotman 2001, p. 28). In autocommunicative meaning-making, the culture (i.e., the abstract “me”) is trying to grow its internal information, to improve the quality of this information, and to transform itself through this information (Torop 2008). Thus, cultural autocommunication comprises in itself the reflection of an immediate identity or the habitual level, but it also comprises the instructions for
interpreting it, so I-I communication facilitates the creation of meta-
languages and metatexts (Torop 2008). The process of organizing and
interpreting immediate identifications takes place through developing
different languages of description (codes). In case of this process, the
culture is trying to explain some topical phenomenon for itself, and
by doing so, it is looking for various languages of description, which
is also the reason why autocommunication becomes very significant in
times of social crisis and other sensitive periods (see Ojamaa and Torop
2010, p. 64). Overall the constant change in the cardinal elements of
communication (addresser, addressee, message, contact, context, code)
implied by the notion of autocommunication that is intermingled with
I-he/she communication makes this perspective a truly trans-actional
perspective. The latter, to recall our exposition in the first chapter,
requires that “systems of description and naming are employed to deal
with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to ‘elements’
or other presumptively detachable or independent ‘entities,’ ‘essences,’
or ‘realities,’ and without isolation of presumptively detachable ‘relations’
from such detachable ‘elements’” (Dewey and Bentley 1949, p. 108).

**Notes**

1. The theoretical synthesis of the Essex School of discourse theory and the
Tartu-Moscow School of cultural semiotics is partly based on Selg and
Ventsel (2010).

2. This is in fact the strategy taken by the most comprehensive study on
the social-scientific potential of post-structuralist political analysis: Glynos
and Howarth (2007, pp. 107–108) point out explicitly that the Lacanian
“phantasmatic” logics provide for them the answer to the question, *why*
certain discourses are upheld.

3. Of course, one can point out here that the *why/how* distinction cannot
be absolute, but only relative: one system’s *why* is another system’s *how.*
Nevertheless, psychoanalysis tends to postulate a primordial *why* answer.

4. One can, of course, wonder why appeal to phatic communication is better
than appeal to Lacanian *affect.* Put very crudely: the primary reason is that
it is observable.

5. Cf. Tilly (2007, p. 3): “Whenever we see presidential candidates winning
election – and especially re-election – by majorities greater than 75 percent,
we should entertain the hypothesis that the regime is conducting sham
elections.”
6. Drawing important parallels between Durkheim and Saussure is relatively established practice within social theory. For instance, Smith and Alexander see semiotics as “reconfiguring… in linguistic manner Durkheim’s later sociological ideas” (Smith and Alexander 2005, pp. 9–10) and for Collins Saussure “drew on Durkheim in formulating the distinction between parole and langue as a separation between individual practice and language as a system of collective representations” (Collins 2004, p. 131). Yet we should follow several qualifications provided by Heiskala concerning the conflation of these two thinkers. When Durkheim speaks of symbols, his usage of this concept is not equivalent to signs in Saussurean sense. Durkheimian signs are “such signifiers which stand for community, solidarity (Durkheim) and/or ‘Hinterwelt’ (Weber)” (Heiskala 2003, p. 190). Hence, “it is symbols, a specific class of signs and not signs in general, that Durkheim was talking about in his analysis of totemic cosmologies” (ibid.). Therefore “theories of these two scholars had different subjects” (ibid.): on the one hand “Saussure studied language as a system of forms enabling communication and outlined a notion of a more general semiological study of culture, which was to emerge following the model of linguistics” (ibid.). For Durkheim the core concern was related to “social facts as moral institutions on which collective order and social solidarity are based. Particularly in Durkheim’s later work, collective consciousness appears as a ritually maintained reality, the existence of which is tied to the division between the sacred and the profane and which is unthinkable without signs that bear strong emotional charge” (ibid.).

7. This latter specification was completely missed by the criticisms of Foucault and Bourdieu discussed in the previous chapter who basically attributed to Saussure a sort of Platonic view of language.

8. The deconstructionists would choose only the last option and extrapolate it to structures as such (see Derrida 2007).

References


CHAPTER 6

Political Semiotics and the Study of the Political: Power, Governance, and Democracy

The notion of translation in terms of discrete/continuous coding from the Tartu-Moscow School and the notion of hegemony in terms of logic of difference/equivalence of the Essex school form the basis for the theory of political semiotics outlined in this book. In this chapter, we take it to the next level, by putting forth a model of public communication that could be utilized for political semiotic analyses of power, governance, and democracy. We have established that studying meaning in terms of translation as the primary mechanism of communication through which meaning-systems or discourses are constituted is the main task of semiotics. The ways through which discrete elements are translated into a more or less continuous whole (system) of meaning is the research object of semiotic explanation. It is important that the mechanism of the constitution of meaning is rhetorical translation that works at the foundation of every meaning-system (Lotman’s “culture,” “text,” “semiosphere,” or “discourse” in Laclau’s sense). This is because the coding systems—the discrete and the continuous—are not directly translatable, but are so only figuratively. This, in turn, means that studying rhetorical figures or tropes that are present in our surrounding world is not just a matter of studying how the world is “expressed” through meanings (in speeches, literature, art, and the like)—it is studying the constitution of the surrounding world itself (tacitly we, of course, presume this world to be what is usually referred to as social world). The world cannot be made sense of outside...
some rhetorically constituted system of meanings. This is why the political, which we propose to analyze as hegemony with its dimensions of power, governance, and democracy is first and foremost for us an issue of different rhetorical translation strategies that are realized in communication (public communication as we specify below). Now, since the dawn of rhetorical studies, there is a distinction between metaphor and metonymy as two opposing rhetorical strategies: the first is presenting constituent elements of meaning as belonging together based on their similarity; the second is doing the same based on their contiguity. The more metaphoric a system of meaning is, the more it is prevailed by the logic of equivalence (Laclau) or continuous coding (Lotman). The more metonymic a system of meaning is, the more it is prevailed by the logic of difference (Laclau) or discrete coding (Lotman). In actual meaning-making, there cannot be a final victory of metaphoric or metonymic principles, but there is always a tendency toward either of them. We could still imagine two opposite world views where either the principle of metaphor or that of metonymy is stretched to its extreme. A “purely” metaphoric world view would be akin to what in cultural semiotics has been described as preliterate mythological consciousness: “The main feature of such a world is universal resemblance of everything to everything; the main organizing structural relation that of homomorphism” (Lotman 2004, p. 570). This world-view “makes one see manifestations of the One phenomenon in the various phenomena of the real world, and observe the One Object behind the diversity of objects of the same type” (ibid., p. 571). Although origins of such a world view go back to preliterate period, as a cultural layer, however, it is still with us in various forms of stereotypes that guide our thinking. A “purely” metonymic world-view would be the one in which everything belongs together with everything as different singular or unique entities. Now, but what lies between those (theoretically imaginable) extremes? Can we even provide some methods for identifying different configurations of meaning between metaphoric and metonymic rhetorical translations? And how are these related to the political, that is, power, governance, and democracy? In this chapter, we take up these issues.

An important link for moving from the general emphasis of the constitutive role played by rhetorical figures or tropes in meaning-making to a concrete framework of analysis is Roman Jakobson’s model of communication. Bringing in Jakobson is a useful step for at least two reasons.
First, as is a common knowledge among semioticians, Jakobson (1971 [1956], pp. 239–259) explicitly identified metaphoric, and metonymic poles of language. This helps us to bring Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of democracy, with which we already briefly got acquainted with in the concluding parts of Chapter 3, into a substantial dialogue with semiotics. To recap, Laclau and Mouffe see democratic discourses as articulated between the tension toward metaphoric and metonymic tendencies. The issue here is roughly this: in one extreme we could imagine democracy as articulated in purely metaphoric terms where basically the mythological consciousness in Lotman’s sense with its perception of universal resemblance of everything with everything prevails. There is total unity and homogeneity in society and, simply put, people act as one. This is a totalitarian extreme of democratic logic. The other extreme would be a totally metonymic discourse where plurality and difference prevail and the contingency of each link between elements constituting the discourse is actively acknowledged. But what types of democracy are there between the purely theoretical extremes of totalitarian social order and the order that is entirely aware of its contingency and the differences constitutive of it? In Lotman’s terms: what forms of democracy are there between completely continuous-mythological and completely discrete-analytic democratic texts? Jakobson’s view of language functions combined with general insights from political scientific research on different public communication could provide us with a coherent view. The guiding insight about the “extremes” of democratic discourse in terms of plurality and homogeneity is well captured by Laclau:

the attempts at homogenizing the social space within which democracy operates (the universal class in Marx, the dissolution of social diversity in a unified public sphere in Jacobinism) necessarily produce a democratic deficit. Democracy faces the challenge of having to unify collective wills in political spaces of universal representation, while making such universality compatible with a plurality of social spaces dominated by particularism and difference. (Laclau 2001, p. 13, italics added)

Jakobson, as we already mentioned in the previous chapter, has distinguished six dimensions of communication that are articulated in the meaning-making process: addresser, addressee, contact, context, message, and code. Depending on different orientations of communication we could say that in their “pure” form there could be communication
oriented to addressee (emotive), addresser (conative), contact (phatic), context (referential), message (poetic), and code (metalingual). Of course, as we will see later, those “pure” forms never exist in actual communication, but we can speak of different hierarchies of those orientations or prevalence of certain orientations, making each communicative act, and in turn, each meaningful whole thoroughly relational. When translated into the problematic of studying the political, we should first point to Jakobson’s general remark concerning those orientations, which he also calls “functions of language”:

The cardinal functions of language – referential, emotive, conative, phatic, poetic, and metalingual – and their different hierarchy in the diverse types of messages have been outlined and repeatedly discussed. This pragmatic approach to language must lead mutatis mutandis to an analogous study of the other semiotic systems: with which of these or other functions are they endowed, in what combinations and in what hierarchical order? (Jakobson 1968, p. 703)

Jakobson envisions a general view of communication studies and its relation to semiotics associating the latter explicitly to “study in communication of any messages” (Jakobson 1968, p. 666, italics added). Semiotics is thus a general study of communication. And if our aim is to delineate possibilities for political semiotics then our focus is not on general, but political communication, that is, public communication in relation to power, governance, and democracy as different dimensions or moments of hegemony. The political semiotic model proposed below deals with conceptualizing different types of hegemony established in public communication. As we have insisted via Laclau and Mouffe, the practico-political continuum of democratic institution of the social lies in between those two extremes that they characterize as “totalitarian” and “radical democratic” imaginary: “while the radical democratic imaginary presupposes openness and pluralism and processes of argumentation which never lead to an ultimate foundation, totalitarian societies are constituted through their claim to master the foundation” (Laclau and Mouffe 1987, pp. 105–106). Connecting the insights of democratic hegemony and Jakobson’s sixfold model of communication—seeing latter and the Essex’ notion of discourse (via Lotman’s notion of translation) as congenial—we could provide a sketch for a model of the political depending on which language function prevails in the system of meaning
(ranging from a singular micro-level communicative act to, in principle, macro-level configurations political culture, period, or era). This would entail semiotic redefinition of power, governance, and democracy in terms of six functions of language (or semiotic system more generally).

As already hinted to, Jakobson never deemed the language functions he distinguished as possible in their pure form: “Although we distinguish six basic aspects of language, we could, however, hardly find verbal messages that would fulfill only one function. The diversity lies not in a monopoly of some one of these several functions, but in a different hierarchical order of functions” (Jakobson 1960, p. 353). So, when we speak of phatic and metalingual communication, we could in practice intelligibly speak of tendencies only. Nevertheless, analytically speaking, we could say that the constitution of the political can have tendencies ranging from phatic, emotive, poetic, conative, referential, and metalingual form as proposed by Jakobson.

In what follows, we will propose six ideal types for conceptualizing power, governance, and democracy in terms of prevalent language function in public communication, and the respective forms of power and governance we discussed in Chapter 3. In this chapter, we present them in a deductive manner—as being separate from each other—which we summarize in a discrete cross-table at the end of the chapter (Table 6.1). However, we want to point out from the beginning that from the relational point of view these categories actually entail abductive research logic rather than deductive or inductive—the usual logics prevailing in inter-actionalist causal analysis. In the next chapter, we explicate what is at stake in constitutive explanation and abductive research logic. The deductive presentation of categories in this chapter is purely a choice regarding the exposition of our argument—we want to render the details of the categories for the reader in a more accessible way before we complicate our framework in the next chapter where we take up the issue of the relations between the categories and their role in political semiotic explanation.

### 6.1 Semiotic Categories for Explaining the Political

In each of the categories outlined below, the general label (like “authoritarian populism” or “authoritarian deproblematization”) refers to an ideal type in which a certain logic of translation or articulation is overwhelmingly prevalent. A crucial notion for us, especially for conceptualizing
democracy is “public communication.” Of course, there is an important strand of research lining up under the banner “Personal is political” we restrict the following presentation to more traditional understanding of power, governance, and democracy—or the political more generally—that views these as public phenomena (as we already pointed out at the end of Chapter 3, referring to the historical extensions of these terms).

Some brief remarks before proceeding. First, “public sphere” or “public communication” is used in a wider sense than the normative Habermasian usages suggest. We speak of, for instance, “totalitarian” public communication that is one among many forms of public communications. We see “public” in a roughly Deweyian sense: “The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for” (Dewey 1988, pp. 245–246). Thus, “public” for us is not defined in terms of particular locations or arenas of society, but through certain trans-actions. Constructing those “agents,” “transactions,” and “consequences” is first and foremost a communicative problem. The stress on public communication should not be overlooked, since we would not want to claim below that phatic communication, for instance, necessarily implies authoritarian personality. Phatic dialogues between lovers, for example, are not signs of authoritarianism per se. What we do want to insist, however, is that the publics among which there is an overwhelming tendency to address issues only for the sake of contact (the phatic function of language) itself—in terms of stereotypes or “common places”—renders a good ground for suspecting deficiency in effective democratic participation in the corresponding social formation.

Second, as is with Jakobson’s language functions the six types we propose highlight only tendencies in the sense that there is, for instance, no “pure” “deliberative democracy,” or “totalitarian populism” to be found in any existing societies. Yet tendencies are discernable. Third as the scheme in Table 6.1 indicates we do not intend those categories to point to a certain diachronic evolution of democracy but insist that these different “democracies” always function to a certain degree synchronically in different strata of the public sphere, and tend trans-act and constitute new combinations. Fourth, three of the labels provided for the categories outlined in the scheme contain the term “populism.” As for the underlying concept, our general view is Laclauian in the sense that “populism” and “democracy” are not markers of certain political content but of the
form or logic of articulation of whatever political content (Laclau 2005, p. 117). In principle, one can articulate “freedom of speech” in a populist form as easily as one can do the same with “expropriation of the expropriators.” The general logic of populism is the discursive simplification of social space into very few (in principle two) antagonistic camps (“people” vs “the establishment,” “proletariat” vs “capitalists,” etc.) through privileging logic of equivalence (continuous/metaphoric translation) in the construction of political discourse (ibid., p. 81). The opposite political logic (the “institutionalist logic”) tries to differentiate between different social elements or demands and hinder their becoming equivalent to each other (discrete translation) (ibid.). Of course, neither logic can gain absolute dominance over the other. We can see an important parallel between the totalitarian and radical democratic logic indicated above. But as Laclau points out: “the spectrum of possible [political] articulations is far more diversified than the simple opposition totalitarianism/democracy seems to suggest” (Laclau 2005, p. 166). All the adjective markers contained in Table 6.1 (“totalitarian,” “authoritarian,” “democratic,” “clientelist,” “deliberative,” “radical”) point to the form of political articulation, not their (ideological) content (like, liberal, socialist, etc.). Thus, one can be “deliberative” about “fascist” contents as well as “totalitarian” about “liberal” contents. And in practice, there is in principle infinite array of variations on the content level, which, of course, can be analyzed separately, but not as being separate from the form. As Laclau points out: “in Latin America populisms a statist discourse of citizens’ rights predominates, while what we find in Eastern Europe is an ethnic populism trying to enhance the particularism of the national values of specific communities” (Laclau 2005, p. 193). This conceptualization of the form of articulation of various political or social contents into a unified discourse is what underlies our proposal in the next chapter to see relational political analysis as political form analysis.

6.1.1 Authoritarian Populism in Power, Governance, and Democracy (Phatic Public Communication)

Why instead of “totalitarianism” we start with “authoritarian populism” a term used by Stuart Hall for conceptualizing Thatcherist political discourse in Britain that despite seeming resemblances to “classical fascism, has retained most (though not all) of the formal representative institution in place, and which at the same time has been able to
construct around itself an active popular consent” (Hall 1979, p. 15; cf. Hall 1985)? First of all, though Hall’s marker insinuates clearly an anti-democratic tendency in Thatcherism, nevertheless, in his usage the marker is clearly inclined toward contents like “nation,” “family,” “duty,” “authority,” “standards,” “self-reliance,” “monetarism,” etc. (Hall 1979, p. 17), delineating Thatcherism as an ideology. Our approach tries to discern “authoritarian populism” as a form of articulation. Hence, our first distinction should start with an effort to distinguish this political form from what is usually deemed even more undemocratic: “totalitarianism.”

The debate concerning the demarcation line between “totalitarian” and “authoritarian” political systems has been intense in recent decades. A good starting point is provided by the Italian scholar, and one of the most widely read democratic theorists alive, Giovanni Sartori in the late 1980s: “the early authors who had personal knowledge of totalitarianism invariably made reference to what happened during Nazism. Contrariwise, no Italian who lived the experience of fascism has ever written a scholarly book taking fascism seriously as a totalitarianism” (Sartori 1987, p. 193). Pointing to early literature on “totalitarianism” (especially the works of Hannah Arendt), Sartori discerns “two paramount referents: Nazism and Stalinism” for the concept (ibid.). In this connection, he highlights an “important mood… of outright dismissal” (ibid., p. 195) of that very concept since the middle of the 1960s on the grounds of its being “a cold-war propaganda tool biased by polemical overtones, and that communist regimes are by now different among themselves and from what they were in the 1950s” (ibid.). Of course, Sartori is far from allying with this mood concerning “totalitarianism,” as are we. We will return briefly to Sartori when we discuss the totalitarian populist communication below. What is important here, however, is that this mood (reviewed by Sartori) of reserving the referent of “totalitarianism” to roughly one-party-one-ideology Leninist-Stalinist systems and Nazism on the one hand, and recourse to the concept of “authoritarianism” in case of contemporary non-democratic political systems, on the other hand, has informed influential works on the subject of the second part of the twentieth century:

Authoritarian regimes are political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism: without elaborate and guiding ideology (but with distinctive mentalities); without intensive nor extensive political mobilization (except some points in their development); and in which a leader (or occasionally a small group) exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones. (Linz 1970, p. 255)
Similar orientations seem to inform other theorists of the same period who prefer to concentrate on a more “benign” forms of contemporary repressive regimes instead of Leninist-Stalinist like “totalitarianisms” (Kirkpatrick 1979); or on “the modern authoritarian model” referring to “an exclusive, centralist political organization populated and dominated by an oligarchic political elite” (Perlmutter 1981, p. 7, italics added). The general Zeitgeist seems to be captured by the most influential liberal writer of the period, Friedrich Hayek:

Democracy is concerned with the question of who is to direct government. Liberalism requires that all power, and therefore also that of the majority, be limited. [...] The difference between the two principles stands out most clearly if we consider their opposites: with democracy it is authoritarian government; with liberalism it is totalitarianism. Neither of the two systems necessarily excludes the opposite of the other: a democracy may well wield totalitarian powers, and it is at least conceivable that authoritarian government might act on liberal principles. (von Hayek 1978, p. 143)

So, totalitarianism does not seem to be a problem for the contemporary world, especially after 1989. Yet authoritarianism does. One of the contemporary symptoms of such attitude could be found from a best-selling work of a political analyst concentrating on “illiberal democracy” (Zakaria 2007) who only sporadically mentions “totalitarianism” in connection with Jacobin or third world regimes of the 1960s (ibid., pp. 65, 268), whereas the talk of “authoritarianism” or “populist authoritarianism” is ubiquitous in his writing, attributing the latter characteristic to many third world countries including Russia and Venezuela (ibid., pp. 99, 259) or China (ibid., p. 269). Roughly the same tendencies are to be found in the works of Robert Dahl (who is often considered to be the most influential American political scientist of the twentieth century) in works conceived both before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Dahl 1989, 1998).

How could we get from those conceptualizations mostly in terms of institutions into those in terms of public communication? In other words: what language functions predominate publicly in an “authoritarian” society, described roughly as “limited pluralism” or “opposite to democracy” on the one hand, but “non-totalitarianism” on the other? A first reorientation should redirect our intention from “authoritarian”
institutions (that could be interpreted in terms of codes and contexts in the Jakobsonian sense) to that of “authoritarian” agents (addressers and addressees). Now, this is the topic that has, in fact, historically inaugurated a whole discipline among the social sciences: political psychology. Usually, the path paving work for that discipline is considered the Frankfurt School’s *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al. 1950). Despite the fact that the original research methods and its unifying psychoanalytic theory of personality have been almost entirely discredited by now, what is still alive these days from this original contribution is the partly pejorative label “authoritarian” itself. In political psychology, “authoritarianism” is the major reference point for explaining intolerance, prejudice, dogmatism, closed belief systems, and strong in-group identifications among people even in an apparently “democratic” society (for classic expositions, see Rokeach 1960; Kelman and Barclay 1963; Lipset 1960; Sales 1973; for more contemporary approaches, see Duckitt 1989; Altemeyer 1996; Doty et al. 1991, Feldman and Stenner 1997).

The general point to make for our purpose from those markers listed above (“intolerance,” “dogmatism,” etc.) is that “authoritarian” agent is generally conceived as what could be called “docile citizenry” that is explicitly considered inconsistent with democracy by one of the increasingly influential “democracy indexes” (that of the *Economist*): “A culture of passivity and apathy – an obedient and docile citizenry – is not consistent with democracy” (Economist Intelligence Unit 2019, p. 48). As is well known, the whole corpus of Michel Foucault’s work has in one way or another been informed by the ethos of disclosing the techniques of creating this “docile population” in modern societies, which he sees as essentially non-democratic:

It is only too clear that we are living under a regime of a dictatorship of class, of a power of class which imposes itself by violence, even when the instruments of this violence are institutional and constitutional; and to that degree, there isn’t any question of democracy for us. (Chomsky and Foucault 2006 [1971])

Moving to most influential critics of Foucault and to explicitly “communicative” direction of conceptualizing this subject we should point to a curious fact that this type of “docile” communicating agent in question is touched but relatively undertheorized by Jürgen Habermas, whose views have informed the model of “deliberative democracy” that could be
interpreted as developing a view of an “anti-docile democratic citizenry” (see below). In his early and strongly psychoanalytically oriented writings, Habermas points to an agent akin to what we try to delineate here:

The dogmatic limitation of false consciousness consists not only in the lack of specific information but in its specific inaccessibility. It is not only a cognitive deficiency; for the deficiency is fixated by habitualized standards on the basis of affective attitudes. That is why the mere communication of information and the labelling of resistances have no therapeutic effect. (Habermas 1971, p. 229)

We could use this hint from Habermas to indicate that the constellation in question is between “communicating information” (Jakobson’s referential function of language) and “habitualized standards on the basis of affective attitudes.” The latter form of communication could best be captured by Jakobson’s phatic communication. Interpreting his and Habermas’ views interchangeably we could say that stating facts and arguments (referential function) within a communication predominated by phatic function (establishing and maintaining contact) would “have no therapeutic effect” by which Habermas means: overcoming “the blocking force that stands in the way of free and public communication of repressed contents” (1971, p. 229). Despite his well-known fundamental theoretical disagreements with “postmodernists” like Jean Baudrillard, Habermas would certainly agree with latter’s general diagnosis of the late-capitalist “tele-dimension of the communications networks”: “Contact for contact’s sake becomes the empty form with which language seduces itself when it no longer has anything to say” (Baudrillard 1991, p. 164). Of course, Baudrillard explicitly refers to Jakobson’s phatic function of language in this connection (ibid.). Jakobson himself points to “entire dialogues with the mere purport of prolonging communication” (Jakobson 1960, p. 355) when delineating this function: “The endeavor to start and sustain communication is typical of talking birds: thus the phatic function of language is the only one they share with human beings” (1960, p. 356). This clearly indicates to the “emptiness” of this type of communication from the informational perspective and locates the communication into the realm of myths and stereotypes exactly as described by Barthes in his conception of myth as “depoliticized speech” (1993, pp. 142–145). Myth:
abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves. (ibid., p. 143)

An ideal type of the phatic public communication is captured by Orwellian figure not of “talking birds” but of duckspeak: “Ultimately it was hoped to make articulate speech issue from the larynx without involving the higher brain centres at all. This aim was frankly admitted in the Newspeak word duckspeak, meaning to ‘quack like a duck.’ Like various words in the B vocabulary, duckspeak was ambivalent in meaning. Provided that the opinions which were quacked out were orthodox ones, it implied nothing but praise” (Orwell 1961, p. 308). But this tendency has been captured by nonfiction studies within the seminal works of political psychology. Lifton speaks of “thought-terminating cliché” through which “the most far-reaching and complex of human problems are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed” (Lifton 1989, p. 429). For example, George Lakoff discusses the conservative metaphor “tax relief” that presents taxes as afflictions by nature and this way framing public communication on social policies. He points out that the democratic-progressive arguments on taxation will not work until this metaphor is adopted by them (Lakoff 2009, pp. 233–239; see also pp. 159–162 for discussion of the stereotype “welfare queen,” created by Ronald Reagan). We could say that he points to the same general logic: this “metaphor,” “stereotype,” “myth,” or “thought-terminating cliché” attunes us to be phatic on the “essence” of taxation and docilely neglect the political bias in its construction.

But this kind of phatic communication does not always reveal itself so directly through repetition of a single metaphor, myth, or “thought-terminating cliché.” As the example from Dorothy Parker’s play utilized by Jakobson (1960, pp. 355–356) clearly indicates it involves appeals to perceived “common places” or stereotypes. Phatic citizenry could be illustrated with these contemporary examples from the American public communication before the second war in Iraq: “Right now we have only opinions about the war. The facts will be known after Saddam is deposed and we find out exactly what he’s been hiding, if anything,” states Fox
News anchor Bill O’Reilly on March 3, 2003. Notice how in his wording the question of “deposing Saddam” is not framed in terms of “if” or “whether,” but in terms of “after”—pointing to the perceived commonplace of ultra-conservative Fox news audience. Britney Spears provides us with an almost ideal-typical example of phatic citizenry: “Honestly, I think we should just trust our president in every decision he makes and should just support that, you know, and be faithful in what happens” (CNN, September 3, 2003).

From these brief remarks, we could provide an initial list of typological features for conceptualizing “authoritarian populism” in terms of phatic public communication:

1. Prevalence of metaphoric stereotypes and “common places” (“We all know that…”) in the public sphere.
2. Public orientation toward contacting the “us” (“public auto-communication”).
3. The public “enemy” is constructed as passive, “official,” and addressed indirectly and abstractly.

In terms of power and governance, this authoritarian populism would include various strategies of de-problematization of policy issues. In fact, in the governance literature, this phatic form of communication is not discussed very much as a form of governance in its own right. What we can, of course, point to are various reactions to governance failure that we mentioned related to Jessop’s discussion of metagovernance in Chapter 3 where he discusses “stoicism” that “rests on passive resignation in the pursuit of familiar routines” (2011, p. 118). This is basically an appeal to commonplaces that would take the problematic issues off the agenda. More than in governance literature, the topic of agenda-setting is discussed in the literature on power. The founding arguments for phatic power could be found already in Weber’s notion of traditional domination (1978, p. 216), Marx’s notion of fetishism (1982, pp. 163–177) developed into a more general framework by Lukacs’ notion of “reification” (1971, pp. 83–110). Contemporary conceptualizations of phatic power include the theories that relate power with the reproduction of tacit social knowledge: Bourdieu’s habitus (1989, pp. 18–19; 1998, pp. 7–8), Giddens’ “practical consciousness knowledge” (1984, pp. 41–45), Foucault’s episteme (2002) (applied not only to scientific
but everyday discourses as well) and disciplinary power (1978, 1979), Lukes’ “false consciousness” (2005), Bachrach and Baratz’s “mobilization of bias” (1962, pp. 949–952) or Clegg’s (1997, p. 207) and Haugaard’s reification (2006, p. 60) in the form of “appeal to nature” (ibid.) could be conceptualized in terms of Jakobson’s phatic communication. In general: authoritarian populism with a prevalence of phatic communication is oriented to presenting given social reality as fixed, unproblematic, and uncontested. This is a ritualized form of power, governance, and democracy, to use the words of Schöpflin who argues that “[r]itual, … establishes solidarity without consensus and does this by relying on an unchanged and unchangeable set of words, even when the non-verbal dimension of ritual functions as a recognisable text in its own right” (2010, p. 43, italics added). The ritual is an important instrument of de-problematization since “the monology of ritual cannot be challenged or if it is, then that challenge is seen as meaningless” (ibid.).

6.1.2 Democratic Populism in Power, Governance, and Democracy (Poetic Public Communication)

First of all: why not “liberal populism,” a term that is widely used in political literature? In fact, the latter is the primary reason: what this label is usually associated with are some ideological contents, mostly neoliberalism (from Friedman to Thatcher) or the populism associated with the Liberal Party in the USA by its opponents. We, as already mentioned, seek for logic of articulations. Hence our preference for “democratic populism.” What this category and its accompanying poetic communication (“the set (Einstellung) toward the MESSAGE as such” [Jakobson 1960, p. 356]) refers to is in fact very familiar for each of us living in a so-called developed country that has established relatively stable institutional framework for democracy (including freedom of speech). What form of populism could be envisioned for those kinds of societies? Laclau provides us with a key:

when we have a highly institutionalized society, equivalential logics have less terrain on which to operate; as a result, populist rhetoric becomes a kind of commodity lacking any sort of hegemonic depth. In that case, populism does indeed become almost synonymous with petty demagogy. (Laclau 2005, p. 191)
“Petty demagogy” is what in a developed country one receives in abundance during each election. This is a populism that emerges in a framework of complete formal freedom of speech acknowledged for each participant. So the general strategy of this populism is to construct different memo-techniques through disrupting stable and routine communication with easily recordable tropes.

“I like Ike,” the conservative Dwight D. Eisenhower’s camping slogan in 1951 US presidential elections, is one of the examples provided by Jakobson himself (1960, p. 357) for illustrating the poetic function of language. From contemporary times we can point to a slogan from the Democrats’ presidential campaign of 2008: “No way, no how, no McCain!”3; or to Rush Limbaugh’s4 typical eloquence: “Watermelons are environmentalists. They’re green on the outside, but red on the inside” (quoted in Pratkanis and Aronson 2001, p. 59). Thus, we propose the following typological features for democratic populism:

1. Prevalence of “disrupting” metaphors in public communication
2. Public orientation toward temporary memorization (“Public Relations management”).
3. The “enemy” is publicly heterogeneous and concrete, but addressed passively (often being “just stupid”).

Democratic populism is another form of de-problematization of policy problems that is not widely discussed in governance literature. Jessop discusses “cynicism” as a reaction to governance failure: “Cynicism is the realm of symbolic politics, accelerated policy churning (to give the impression of doing something about intractable problems), and the ‘spin doctor’ – the realm of ‘words that work and policies that fail’. This is particularly evident in the highly mediatized world of contemporary politics” (2011, p. 118). This is basically governance that displaces policy issues without addressing them by constructing them as problems for which a readymade solution is at hand. In terms of power, Bourdieu points out that “there are always, in any society, conflicts between symbolic powers that aim at imposing the vision of legitimate divisions, that is, at constructing groups. Symbolic power, in this sense, is a power of ‘world-making’” (1989, p. 22, italics added). Referring to Nelson Goodman (1978) he specifies that this “‘world-making’ consists ‘in separating and reuniting, often in the same operation,’ in carrying out a


decomposition, an analysis, and a composition, a synthesis, often by the use of labels” (ibid.). That is why creating poetic equivalences is often key to this type of power strategy.

But, what happens in a democracy after the “free” elections, when voters have made their “choice” based on the symbolic politics of poetic world-making they are exposed to? Depends on how we conceive democracy. According to Joseph Schumpeter (2003, p. 269): “the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.” This is the classic “procedural minimalist” definition of democracy with its clear vision of the role of citizens: “since electorates normally do not control their political leaders in any way except by refusing to reelect them or the parliamentary majorities that support them, it seems well to reduce our ideas about this control in the way indicated by our definition” (ibid., p. 272). Were we to adopt this view of democracy, then we would have to envision “parties,” or rather “party leaders” as the central agents of public democratic politics and would have what is usually referred to as the “clientelist” system in political literature. But the public communication type characteristic to this system is best captured by Jakobson’s “conative” language function: “Orientation toward ADRESSEE... [that] finds its purest grammatical expression in the vocative and imperative” (1960, p. 355).

6.1.3 Clientelism in Power, Governance, and Democracy (Conative Public Communication)

Clientelism, “an exchange of votes for political favours” (Laclau 2005, p. 122), “is not necessarily populistic; it can adopt purely institutional forms” (ibid., p. 123). Drawing on vast amount of literature on “clientelism” Hallin and Papathanassopoulos discern the phenomenon as follows: “Clientelism refers to a pattern of social organization in which access to social resources is controlled by patrons and delivered to clients in exchange for deference and various kinds of support” (2002, pp. 184–185). Orienting themselves directly to media analysis, they indicate that this political system is characteristic to many countries for whom “the conflict between liberal democratic and authoritarian traditions continued through most of the 20th century” (ibid., p. 175). They analyze the cases of southern Europe (Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal) and Latin America (Brazil, Colombia, Mexico) as “clientelist” systems. The list could most
certainly be complemented with virtually all the East-European countries that were not Soviet Republics between 1940 and 1990 (plus the Baltic states that were). What is important in our endeavor is how Hallin and Papathanassopoulos characterize this system (formally democratic in the Schumpeterian sense) more generally:

“It is a particularistic and asymmetrical form of social organization, and is typically contrasted with forms of citizenship in which access to resources is based on universalistic criteria and formal equality before the law” (ibid., p. 185). Thus, we have a reference to “asymmetry.” But what is even more important is the reference to “verticality”.

First, “clientelism” “seems to undermine the horizontal group organization and solidarity of patrons and clients alike – but especially of clients” (Eisenstadt and Roniger, 1984, p. 49). Second, it “cuts across and prevents the development of horizontal, class-type political organizations” (Mouzelis 1980, p. 263) (both quotes in Hallin and Papathanassopoulos 2002, p. 187). Referring to Putnam for whom the horizontal “networks of civic engagement facilitate communication and improve the flow of information about the trustworthiness of individuals” (1993, p. 174), Hallin and Papathanassopoulos point out that in “clientelist forms of social organization, on the other hand, information tends to be treated as a privately-held resource, to be exchanged only within particularistic relationships” (2002, p. 188). Thus we have a “vertical” and “asymmetric” communication which among other things “places a premium on public demonstrations of loyalty to the patron” (ibid., p. 189). Thus we could conceive this kind of democracy as a certain juristic command politics in which political problems are more or less decided in the “cabinet” or “parliament” and enter public communication in more or less formal announcements of what the (new) law requires. We argue that what lies behind this model of democracy is an implicit notion of a conative public sphere. The paradigm medium of clientelist democracy or conative public communication could be “State Gazette” (“Riigiteataja”) of Estonia that announces the laws that have been promulgated by the President. The point here is that these announcements, though necessary for working democracy, lack any dialogic or horizontal dimension, but are strictly speaking just imperatives or “interpellations” in Althusser’s (1971) sense. But of course, this conative public communication enters not only the mediums of “repressive” but “ideological state apparatuses” (ISA) as well, the latter being exemplified for Althusser by media (among other things).
We provide a more general list of typological features for conative public communication as follows:

1. Prevalence of discourse framed in terms of juristic “interpellations” and “formal civil rights” in public communication.
2. Public orientation toward “formal” citizenship (public administration).
3. The “enemy” is publicly heterogeneous and concrete but addressed formally (in terms of “law-making” or “administration”).

Governance that manifests itself mainly through vocative and imperative—that is through the conative function of language is referred to as hierarchy in governance literature. The main mechanism of hierarchy is command in the broadest sense, including bureaucratic directives, performance measurements, and direct orders in rank-based branches of executive power. Command in general “involves \textit{ex ante} imperative coordination in pursuit of substantive collective goals set from above (hierarchical command in the firm, organization, or state). It prioritizes the ‘effective’ pursuit of successive policy goals” (Jessop 2016, p. 167).

Of course, this is related to the most classical understanding of power, and its roots lead back to at least Hobbes’ \textit{Leviathan}. From more contemporary times, it is again Weber who lies behind this view when he distinguishes “two diametrically contrasting types of domination, viz., domination by virtue of a constellation of interests (in particular: by virtue of a position of monopoly), and domination by virtue of authority, i.e. power to command and duty to obey” (1978, p. 943). The former (“based upon influence derived exclusively from the possession of goods or marketable skills guaranteed in some way and acting upon the conduct of those dominated, who remain, however, formally free and are motivated simply by the pursuit of their own interests” [ibid.]) could be conceptualized as a pure form of conative power. The classical pluralist (Dahl 1957, 1989) and elitist (Mills 1956) views of power that inform the bulk of mainstream political science are also relevant here since they revolve around either actual decision-making or the potential to force through decisions.

If receiving orders between elections is the only function for citizens, many (except the Schumpeterians and populists described above) would still suspect a democratic deficiency in this system. Schumpeter reveals
more clearly what he has in mind in his model of democracy in which political parties are the only public actors: “Party and machine politicians are simply the response to the fact that the electoral mass is incapable of action other than a stampede, and they constitute an attempt to regulate political competition exactly similar to the corresponding practices of a trade association” (2003, p. 283).

The view of “stampeding citizenry” involved here is, of course, one of the starting points for the harshest criticisms of Schumpeterianism, the most elaborated among them being “deliberative” and “radical democrats.” We turn now to the former.

6.1.4 Deliberative Power, Governance, and Democracy (Referential Public Communication)

All in all Jürgen Habermas’ theory of “communicative action” seems to be the most important source for this ideal model of democratic communication, despite the fact that his own opus magnum oriented explicitly on the issues of democracy (1996a [1992]) came out several years after the term started to gain wide acceptance as referring to distinct model of democracy, especially after Joshua Cohen’s (2005 [1987]) intervention. Habermas sees his discourse theory as working “with the higher-level intersubjectivity of communication processes that flow through both the parliamentary bodies and the informal networks of the public sphere. Within and outside the parliamentary complex, these subjectless forms of communication constitute arenas in which a more or less rational opinion- and will-formation can take place” (Habermas 1996b, p. 28). But what counts as a rational will-formation could be conceptualized in terms of Jakobson’s “REFERENTIAL, ‘denotative,’ ‘cognitive’ function,” “an orientation toward the context” (1960, p. 353) and could best be captured in statements of propositions or statements of opinions with a clear reference to their being opinions. In other words, addressing the very context of a discourse and concrete applications of its rules is deemed to be an important part of this model insisting “on the original meaning of democracy in terms of the institutionalization of a public use of reason jointly exercised by autonomous citizens” (Habermas 1996b, p. 23).

In arguing for the thesis proposed here, an important question needs to be addressed that might strike those familiar with Habermas’ views on “discourse ethics” and democracy: why conceptualize “deliberative democracy” in terms of referential rather than metalingual function of
language, a “speech… focused on the CODE” (Jakobson 1960, p. 356)? First, the conceptualization is not exhaustive even in case of Habermas, who in different places lets himself to be interpreted as arguing for both referential as well as metalingual communication. Second, different schools of “deliberative democracy” tend to move more straightly into the direction that in our exposition is reserved for the “radical democrats.” In a way, we could conceive “deliberative” and “radical” democratic views as mutually presupposing each other despite the well-established frontlines between their exponents (see Knops 2007 for a similar view). We will touch those issues in order.

Habermas’ view seems to be clearly indicating referential communication when he discerns his “communicative rationality”:

In contexts of communicative action, we call someone rational not only if he is able to put forward an assertion and, when criticized, to provide grounds for it by pointing to appropriate evidence, but also if he is following an established norm and is able, when criticized, to justify his action by explicating the given situation in the light of legitimate expectations. (Habermas 1984, p. 15)

In other words: rational agents need not put the “legitimate expectations” or “established norms” themselves into question (that would be metalingual communication). He moves to a more ambivalent path in view of “feelings” when he first continues with a statement in the similar referential vein: “We call a person rational who interprets the nature of his desires and feelings [Bedürfnisnatur] in the light of culturally established standards of value” (Habermas 1984, p. 20). Yet the sentence continues with a more metalingual orientation: “but especially if he can adopt reflective attitude to the very value standards through which desires and feelings are interpreted” (ibid.). Now, this clearly hints that not only context but also code has to be addressed by “rational” people. Yet moving from the level of “justificatory” discourses of norms to those of their “application,” Habermas adds that the latter ought discern “which of the norms already accepted as valid is appropriate in a given case in the light of all the relevant features of the situation conceived as exhaustively as possible” (1993, p. 14). This implies referential, rather than metalingual activity. He seems to be pointing to the latter in case of moral-practical discourses of “validity” that “require a break with all of the unquestioned truths of an established, concrete ethical life, in addition to distancing oneself
from the contexts of life with which one’s identity is inextricably interwoven” (ibid., p. 12). Thus rational persons seem to be in constant tension between referential and metalingual communication, or, as the English title of Habermas’ most important work on the issue (1996a) suggests: between facts and norms. However, the key for arguing that it is primarily the former that sets the limiting conditions for this form of democratic communication comes from Habermas’ differentiation between “identity claims” and “validity claims”:

self of the practical relation-to-self reassures itself about itself through the recognition that its claims receive from an alter ego. But these identity claims aiming at intersubjective recognition must not be confused with the validity claims that the actor raises with his speech acts. For the “no” with which the addressee rejects a speech-act offer concerns the validity of a particular utterance, not the identity of the speaker. The speaker certainly could not count on the acceptance of his speech acts if he did not already presuppose that the addressee took him seriously as someone who could orient his action with validity claims. The one must have recognized the other as an accountable actor whenever he expects him to take a position with “yes” or “no” to his speech-acts offers. In communicative action everyone thus recognizes the other in his own autonomy. (Habermas 1992, pp. 189–190)

In other words: everyone has to accept already the code that positions everyone’s identity as speakers before posing any validity claims could intelligibly be undertaken. This means that despite the metalingual orientation of validity claims, the metalingual communication has clear limits in this model. As is well known and dealt with below, it is precisely this aspect of “deliberative democracy” that is one of the central targets of “radical democratic” attacks. However, “deliberative democracy” has established itself as the most influential normative model of democracy in the political literature of the last couple of decades. It is instructive to view Joshua Cohen’s original outline of the procedure of the deliberative ideal. The latter is (1) free in the sense that “the participants regard themselves as bound only by results of their deliberation and by the preconditions for that deliberation” and that “the participants suppose that they can act from the results, taking the fact that a certain decision is arrived at through their deliberation as a sufficient reason for complying with it” (Cohen 2005, p. 347); (2) it is reasoned, roughly in the sense that “no force except that of the better argument is exercised” (Habermas
1975, p. 108, quoted in Cohen 2005, p. 347). The parties involved are (3) equal both formally and substantially in a sense that no distribution of power affects the deliberation (Cohen 2005, pp. 347–348). (4) The ideal deliberation “aims to arrive at a rationally motivated consensus” (Cohen 2005, p. 348). As one can see, the code here is presumed to be established and not questioned. Habermas introduces the category of “social rights” for this establishment. These are: “basic rights to the provision of living conditions that are socially, technologically, and ecologically safeguarded, insofar as the current circumstances make this necessary if citizens are to have equal opportunities to utilise [their] civil rights” (Habermas 1996a, p. 35). These rights ought to guarantee real and fair opportunities of participation in the public debate over the constitution of civil and political rights for even those who are marginalized by the “market” thus excluding the political dominance of those with better material resources.

Having established that “deliberative democracy” is primarily a referential public communication we can outline the typological features of the latter:

1. Prevalence of discourse framed in terms of social rights in public communication.
2. Public orientation toward “substantial” citizenship.
3. The “enemy” is publicly an “adversary,” heterogeneous and addressed as a legitimate “other.”
4. The deconstruction of narrative “empty signifiers” into political facts, opinions, and arguments (“well-fare state” “thin state,” “left” and “right,” etc. into concrete policy proposals and their justifications).

Deliberative form of governance is usually associated with networks or the so-called heterarchy—it is a form of governance that lies between the anarchy of the market and the hierarchy of the state. The form of communication in network governance is dialogue which

involves a continuing reflexive self-organization based on networks, negotiation, and deliberation that is oriented to redefining goals in the light of changing circumstances around a long-term consensual project, which is taken as the basis for negative and positive coordination of actions. Negative coordination refers to the tacit or explicit agreement to avoid causing problems for other partners or stakeholders when determining one’s own
course of action. Positive coordination refers to active cooperation in the pursuit of shared goals. (Jessop 2016, p. 167)

Network form of governance is a shift away from more traditional [hierarchical] patterns in which governing was basically seen as ‘one way traffic’ from those governing to those governed, toward a ‘two way traffic’ model in which aspects, qualities, problems and opportunities of both the governing system and the system to be governed are taken into consideration. (Kooiman 1993, p. 4)

It would be a realization about authority that would not be relevant in self-active governance in either of its forms, the realization that

[a]uthority is not just a toolkit in the hands of A, nor does it link with a universal norm or abstract liberty which unfolds itself behind the backs of A and B. Authority makes A’s rational exercise of her or his power directly dependent on B’s self-reflexive doing and refraining. Authority in this way conditions A and B to co-operate minimally, at least across system and life world in a political division of labour. (Bang 2003, p. 16)

This “two way traffic” form of inter-active governance “has a substantive, procedural rationality that is dialogic rather than monologic, pluralistic rather than monolithic, heterarchic rather than hierarchical or anarchic” (Jessop 2016, pp. 167–169). It works “on the basis of continuing dialogue in order to establish the grounds for negotiated consent, resource sharing, and concerted action in mutually beneficial joint projects” and

depends on continuing commitment to generate and share information (thereby reducing, without ever eliminating, the problem of bounded rationality [the main cause of the failure of self-active governance]); to weaken opportunism by locking partners into a range of interdependent decisions over short-, medium-, and long-term time horizons; and to build on the interdependencies and risks linked to ‘asset specificity’ by encouraging solidarity among dialogue partners. (Jessop 2016, p. 169)

This is what we can conceptualize as the constitution of public through referential communication. It is understandably hard to conceptualize
deliberative power, since as we already saw, in an ideal deliberative procedure no power relation should affect the deliberation. Nevertheless, the genealogy of the referential notion of power might again be traced back to at least Weber’s conception of legal-rational domination (1978, pp. 217–226), that is, rationally legitimate power over. However, as it is argued in several normative models, this form of power might also be considered as power to in the sense of springing from people’s ability to act in concert (Arendt 1970, p. 52) or as “the formation of common will in a communication directed to reaching agreement” (Habermas 1996a, p. 76). Consequently, in its ideal朣ypical form, this is the power in the form of the (unforced) force of a better argument (Habermas 1975, p. 108).

**6.1.5 Radical/Agonistic Democracy, Power and Governance (Metalingual Public Communication)**

“What is right, or even what a right is, cannot in itself determine political judgment. Rights themselves… are both constantly being redefined and interpreted and dependent for their normative force on the engagement and commitment of an active citizen body,” writes Benjamin Barber (1996, p. 354), one of the most influential proponents of “strong democracy” (Barber 1984) and critic of both deliberative and Schumpeterian minimalist models of democracy that for him presume merely a passive citizenship in terms of rights. What he is aiming at is a public sphere emphasizing “revolutionary spirit,” “autonomy,” and “commonality of political judgment” (Barber 1996, pp. 350–354) as the true constituents of democracy. He is allied with a lot of writers like James Tully, William Connolly, Claude Lefort, Bonnie Honig, David Owen, Jacques Ranciere, Alain Badiou and others who in one way or another set at the heart of democracy the ethos of contingency. As Jason Glynos explains the latter: “such an ethos would entail not only the descriptive claim that political identities and interests are constructed and that the process of construction is constitutive, but also the normative claim that they ought to be seen as such” (2003, p. 195). This ethos is, of course, captured most influentially by Laclau and Mouffe’s “project for a radical democracy” conceived in a form of politics which is founded not upon dogmatic postulation of any “essence of the social,” but, on the contrary, on affirmation of the contingency and ambiguity of every “essence” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 193). When the “essence” or “ground” for the social (discourse, rules, text, etc.) is overwhelmingly questioned and
conceived as contingent, we are dealing with metalingual communication *par excellence*. The latter is what we associate primarily with radical democracy.

Wolf Blitzer, a conservatively inclined CNN host, imposes a clearly *phatic* form of communication on the US presidential debate in June 2, 2007: “I want you to raise your hand if you believe English should be the official language of the United States.” Barack Obama’s reaction is aimed at the very code that was imposed through this proposal:

This is the kind of question that is designed precisely to divide us. You know, you’re right. Everybody is going to learn to speak English if they live in this country. The issue is not whether or not future generations of immigrants are going to learn English. The question is: how can we come up with both a legal, sensible immigration policy? And when we get distracted by those kinds of questions, I think we do disservice to the American people. (the whole dialogue is cited from Lakoff 2009, p. 153)

This is what could be interpreted as “radical democracy” in the micro-level: the code of the question was dismissed and an alternative code proposed. But “radical democracy” could take a far more general form, questioning the very code of discursive/social formation:

The development of workers’ and anti-capitalist struggles during the nineteenth century was a crucial moment in this process, but it was not the only or the last one: the struggles of the so-called “new social movements” of the last few decades are a further phase in the deepening of the democratic revolution. (Laclau and Mouffe 1987, pp. 104–105)

We offer a preliminary sketch of the typological features of “radical democracy” in terms of metalingual public communication:

1. Prevalence of questioning the *constitution* of freedoms, rights, and obligations in the public communication.
2. Public orientation toward a general audience (including non-citizens, minorities, etc.).
3. The “adversary” is addressed in terms of “common grounds” and values that in turn are deemed as *contingent*.
4. The deconstruction of central public facts, arguments, and values into their (rational, historical, contingent, etc.) conditions of possibility.
It is no coincidence that the form of governance that can be associated with the prevalence of metalingual public communication is termed “metagovernance” in the literature. Metagovernance or “governance of governance” as it is sometimes described is often associated exactly with questioning and specifying not even the underlying rules or norms of governance, but the very values from which those norms are derived (Kooiman 2003; Kooiman and Jentoft 2009). The principles of “requisite variety,” “reflexive orientation,” and “self-reflexive irony” that Jessop discussed in relation a suitable ethos of metagovernance all boil down to questioning the foundations of governance practices, including why they and not others have become dominant, hegemonic or just taken-for-granted. The meta-governor deemed appropriate, especially for turbulent environment and wicked problems, is supposed to be an ironist (and not a phatic stoic or poetic cynic which we discussed related to authoritarian and democratic populist governance):

ironist accepts incompleteness and failure as essential features of social life but acts as if completeness and success were possible. She must simplify a complex, contradictory, and changing reality in order to be able to act – knowing full well that any such simplification is also a distortion of reality and, what is worse, that such distortions can sometimes generate failure even as they are also a precondition of relatively successful intervention to manage complex interdependence. (Jessop 2011, p. 119)

The metalingual notion of power could be associated with Giddens’ (1984, pp. 41–45) differentiation between practical and discursive consciousness knowledge. Practical consciousness knowledge according to Giddens is the tacit knowledge that is not put into question and usually not even realized: it is the taken-for-granted knowledge based on which everyday conduct is carried out more or less automatically. Discursive consciousness knowledge is the knowledge that is put into explicit reflective form: into words, arguments, and questions. Metalingual power is present in the transformation of practical consciousness knowledge into discursive consciousness knowledge. This is, of course, the notion of power that radical democrats (especially Laclau and Mouffe and their school) associate with the political power par excellence. As Glynos and Howarth put it “a demand is political to the extent that it publicly contests the norms of particular practice or systems of practices in the name of a principle or ideal” (2007, p. 115). And of course, a “radical political
demand would be one that publicly contests a fundamental norm of a practice or regime” (ibid.). In Jakobson’s terms, this would be metalingual challenging of the political code. However, in line with the discussion in one of our earlier papers on this topic (Selg 2010) about the threats that surround this form of power we should point out that it might give rise to the situation where the code is “broken” (even “in the name of a principle or ideal”) without any replacement.

We have seen that both “deliberative” and “radical” democracy might have tendencies toward questioning the code of the very democratic discourse itself and that in the latter tradition this is deemed to be the differentia specifica of democracy “founded upon the legitimacy of a debate as to what is legitimate and what is illegitimate – a debate which is necessarily without any guarantor and without any end” (Lefort 1988, p. 39). What is important here is that radical democracy does not take any political identities as given and aims always to leave their constitution open for revisions and contestations. In other words, even the code is never fixed for radical democrats: “as the constituencies of a potential democratic deliberation are constantly transformed and expanded, the institutional framework which makes that deliberation possible will also be variable. Radical democracy cannot be attached to any a priori fixed institutional formula” (Laclau 2004, p. 295). The reason is simple: fixing the code a priori is exclusionary in nature. As Chantal Mouffe explains it criticizing Rawls’ and Habermas’ deliberative democracy for their orientation toward consensus of the rules of politics: “What such a view implies is that, once such a consensus has been obtained, it cannot be legitimately challenged” (2005, p. 227).

And this challenging is crucial for radical democrats. As Laclau puts it: “Democracy is only radical if it involves an effort to give political voice to the underdog” (ibid.). However, the other side of the same coin for Laclau is the logic of populism that “presupposes an essential asymmetry between the community as a whole (the populus) and the underdog (the plebs)... the latter is always a partiality that identifies itself with the community at large” (Laclau 2005, p. 224). This points to the possible “bifurcation point” of the ideal of “radical democracy.” In principle, “bringing in the underdog” could mean not only recourse to deliberative questioning of existing codes as is the view in more radically oriented strands of deliberative democracy (see Benhabib 1996, p. 70), but doing away with the very “deliberative” way of addressing political issues as is evident in several “totalitarian” turns of twentieth-century politics. As
Marchart explains the crucial demarcation line between democracy and totalitarianism: “What distinguishes democracy from totalitarianism and other forms of ideology is that in democracy the general condition of the absence of a positive ground is not occulted but institutionally recognized and discursively actualized” (Marchart 2007, p. 107). But what if it is occulted? What if the institutional framework is wholly shattered and no norms are deemed valid anymore?

This is the theme of Lotman in his *Culture and Explosion*:

In the space, which lies beyond the limits of the norm (which is based on the norm and which disrupts it) we encounter a whole range of possibilities: from abnormality (destruction of the norm) to a whole gamut of positive qualities situated over and above the norm. However, in both cases we are talking, not about a depletion of the norm, a simplification or a fixed view of the latter but rather of “Life’s Abundance”, to borrow the title of one of Ludwig Tieck’s short stories. (2009, p. 78)

He points to logic that could be interpreted as an important caveat for radical democracy:

Exit beyond the boundaries of a structure may be realised as an unpredictable movement into another structure. In this case that which from a different point of view may be considered as systemic and predictable and within the limits of this structure is actualised as the unpredictable consequence of explosion. (ibid., p. 85)

What if the questioning of rules ends up in the mere affirmation that “everything is changed” or “nothing will be the same anymore” without any positive grounding of the newly changed rules? For the sake of provocation, we will first put forward a caricature form of this kind of communication using a roughly 15 seconds long dialogue form a cartoon comedy series *Family Guy* (from the episode “La Padre de Familia”). The following exchange takes place between Brian (the talking dog, usually associated with humanist attitudes) and Peter (the head of the family, usually depicted as an idiot) when the latter shows up dressed in a suit colored in the American flag:

*Brian:* Peter, you do realize there’s a difference between loving America and being swept up in post 9/11 paranoia?
*Peter:* Brian, are you suggesting that 9/11 didn’t change everything?
*Brian:* What? No, I was just...
Peter: Because 9/11 changed everything, Brian!!! 9/11 changed everything!!!

Brian: Peter, you didn’t even know what 9/11 was until until 2004!

The discourse of “9/11 changed everything” is widely acknowledged by social scientists in relation to the George W. Bush administration political strategy (see Dunmire 2009; Kellner 2002 for an overview). A good non-cartoon example comes from Dick Cheney from December 22, 2003: “In a sense, 9/11 changed everything for us. 9/11 forced us to think in new ways about threats to the United States, about our vulnerabilities, about who our enemies were, about what kind of military strategy we needed in order to defend ourselves” (cited in Dunmire 2009, p. 195).

This discourse we interpret to be a good contemporary example of what we characterize as “totalitarian populism” conceptualized in terms of emotive public communication.

6.1.6 Totalitarian Populism in Power, Governance, and Democracy (Emotive Public Communication)

Let us return to Sartori: “The crucial difference between totalitarianism and authoritarianism is not in what they actually do… but in their respective potentialities” (1987, p. 201). Pointing out that in case of governmental form it is more useful to “transform totalitarianism as an object concept… into ‘totalitarian’ as a predicate,” he offers the following formula for locating it within different governmental forms: “the structure is dictatorship, and one of its variants (its most extreme, if not ideal-typic one) is the totalitarian dictatorship” (ibid., 203). However, that “totalitarianism” is a communicative problem not merely one of government is evident already in the seminal works on the subject by Hannah Arendt: “Only the mob and the elite can be attracted by the momentum of totalitarianism itself; the masses have to be won by propaganda” (1962, p. 341). She adds: “Propaganda, in other words, is one, and possibly the most important, instrument of totalitarianism for dealing with the nontotalitarian world; terror, on the contrary, is the very essence of its form of government” (ibid., p. 344). We conceptualize “propaganda” in terms of emotive public communication, differentiating it from “public relations management” that is usually reserved for what we have characterized in terms of poetic public communication. Of course, this demarcation is not absolute but rather ideal-typical.
A quick example of what we mean by emotive public communication could be illustrated as follows:

The Battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror that began on September the 11th, 2001, and still goes on. That terrible morning, 19 evil men — the shock troops of a hateful ideology — gave America and the civilized world a glimpse of their ambitions. They imagined, in the words of one terrorist, that September the 11th would be the “beginning of the end of America.” (George W. Bush, May 1, 2003)

It is characteristic that this communication is reinforced by the most influential news channel in the USA already before the military activity in Iraq:

Once the war against Saddam begins, we expect every American to support our military, and if they can’t do that, to shut up. Americans, and indeed our allies, who actively work against our military once the war is underway will be considered enemies of the state by me. Just fair warning to you, Barbra Streisand, and others who see the world as you do. (Fox News anchor Bill O’Reilly, February 26, 2003)

As one of the earlier analysts of the “9/11 changed everything” discourse points out: “Bush articulated his ‘doctrine’ by declaiming ‘either you’re with us, or against us’ in the war on terrorism, suggesting that whoever did not follow Bush administration policies was an enemy” (Kellner 2002, p. 153). This presupposes a more active metaphoric world view than that discussed under “authoritarian” or “phatic” communication: “The Bush administration discourse of a perpetual war against evil evokes a Manichean theological mindset that divides the world into a battle between good and evil and takes for granted that one’s own side is ‘good’” (Kellner 2002, p. 153).

Drawing from cultural psychology of Kupina (1995), Vygotsky and Luria (1993), and other students of Soviet “totalitarian language,” Ventsel summarizes the phenomenon as follows:

totalitarian language can be described as a language whose target is to give form to the linguistic consciousness of a primitive man. Primitive thinking is characterised by the feeling of selfsuperiority (in totalitarian language, an absolute value judgement, where ‘us’ is always marked as the bearer of
positive value) and the avoidance of complex thought operations that may threaten to crack the ready-made world-view. (2009, p. 16)

We provide an initial list of typological features as follows:

1. Prevalence of emotions and metaphorical antagonisms in public communication.
2. Public orientation toward intimidating the “us” through “them” (public non-communication)
3. The “enemy” is publicly passive and homogeneous, but addressed directly (often being “one of us”)
4. The reduction of “empty signifiers” into icons of “them” (“War on terror; “the brown plague”).

In terms of governance, this is a form of de-problematization of policy problems that appeals to general and often abstract threats to the public, through depicting the enemy that is identifiable but not containable and hinders through its vicious activities the very foundation of the public (be it embodied in a nation, state, or group).

The view that “totalitarianism” should not be conflated with ancient form of governance usually referred to as despotism or tyranny, since it is a specifically modern and “democratic” phenomenon or even one emerging not until the twentieth-century “mass society,” has gained much support since Arendt (see Arendt 1962; cf. Sartori 1987, pp. 193–203; Marchart 2007, p. 101; Lefort 1988). As Marchart summarizes this position: totalitarianism “is one of the two major directions in which the democratic revolution can evolve: democracy and totalitarianism; and, since it is rooted in the democratic revolution, totalitarianism cannot be clearly and definitely separated from democracy” (2007, pp. 101–102).

Drawing on Lefort we could characterize totalitarian populist discourse as one in which “social division, in all its modes, is denied, and at the same time all signs of differences of opinion, belief or mores are condemned” (1988, p. 13). This might point to phatic communication that we attributed to “authoritarian populism.” Yet, as Marchart is quick to explain:

since that division can never be completely erased as an ontological dimension and will continue to surface in the form of disturbances of the imaginary concealment, it has to be displaced. In order for the ‘People-as-One’ to be presented as a totality, as full identity, a relation to some sort
of outside is inevitable. What acts as the new outside is a series of internal substitutes representing the ‘enemy within’: the kulaks, the bourgeoisie, the Jews, spies, and saboteurs. (2007, p. 102)

The paradox of totalitarianism is thus the following: “division is denied ... and, at the same time as this denial, a division is being affirmed, on the level of phantasy, between the People-as-One and the Other” (Lefort 1988, p. 298). This points to the fact that “totalitarianism needs the enemy as a reference point and thus relies on division at the very moment when the latter is decried” (Marchart 2007, p. 103). And the role of it is a populist cohesion: “Precisely because totalitarianism presents itself as an entirely rational order, it has to adopt the form of an uncontaminated purity, and that which is excluded has, conversely, to be essentially impure” (Laclau 1990, p. 90).

The roots of what could be called emotive power are, again, pretty traditional. It was among the central concerns of Machiavelli’s Prince in its discussions on the role of fear and love as instruments of power over especially in the phase of nascent rule. We can also see them in Weber’s notion of charismatic authority (1978, pp. 241–245) in the sense of power to. All the models of power that conceptualize the latter in terms of, for instance, manipulating emotions or the need to “constantly short-circuit all thought and decision” (Ellul 1973, p. 27) could be articulated into the emotive notion of power. Of course, the appeal to emotive power is present at least latently in all the conceptions that grasp it in terms of “threat of violence” in the roughly Weberian sense. Of course, as the purely “emotive communication” would amount to non-communication (in the form of unarticulated interjections), the pure “threat of violence” could be conceived to fuse into the very “violence” itself. And this is the moment when, for many significant theorists—both normative (Arendt 1970) and analytical (Foucault 1982; Luhmann 1979; Haugaard 2010, pp. 434–435)—power ceases to function. Thus “physical power is not the ultimate form of power. Quite the contrary, its use represents the failure of social power” (Haugaard 2003, p. 108). The point, however, is that “in most complex social orders violence is blended with social power and then we get coercion” (ibid.). Similarly, the purely emotive power is, in practice, usually blended with other forms of power—and this, of course, in a way, holds regarding all the six forms of power discussed here.

In Table 6.1, we summarize the discussion of the categories of political semiotic analysis as they are presented thus far.
Table 6.1  Deductive presentation of the semiotic categories for explaining the political

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of democracy</th>
<th>Form of power</th>
<th>Form of governance</th>
<th>Dominant orientation in public communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Totalitarian populism</td>
<td>Emotive power (threat, fear, charisma, agitative propaganda)</td>
<td>Governance as de-problematization through constructing threats (securitization, war, apocalypse)</td>
<td>Emotive: orientation toward addressee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritarian populism</td>
<td>Phatic power (retification, mobilization of bias, tacit knowledge, rituals, myths, stereotypes)</td>
<td>Governance as de-problematization through stoicism (passive resignation, familiar routines)</td>
<td>Phatic: orientation toward contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic populism</td>
<td>Poetic power (“world-making”)</td>
<td>Governance as de-problematization through cynicism (‘spin doctor’, displacement)</td>
<td>Poetic: orientation toward message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clientelist democracy</td>
<td>Conative power (command, directive, order)</td>
<td>Governance as hierarchy (administration, bureaucracy)</td>
<td>Conative: orientation toward addressee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberative democracy</td>
<td>Referential-rational power (‘force of a better argument’)</td>
<td>Governance as network</td>
<td>Referential: orientation toward context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agonistic/radical democracy</td>
<td>Metalingual power (power to make practical knowledge into discursive knowledge)</td>
<td>Metagovernance (‘self-reflective irony’)</td>
<td>Metalingual: orientation toward code.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.2 General Comments on the Categories of Political Semiotics

In the concluding section of the chapter, we add some general comments on the categories and their positioning within semiotic analysis of the political before we delve deeply into the character of semiotic explanation in the next chapter where we also present our framework in an abductive manner where all the categories are presented separately, but not as being separate.

6.2.1 The Categories Are Ideal Types

It is vital to point out that the whole discussion in this chapter has been at the level of ideal types: this means that we basically performed a thought experiment and presumed more or less total prevalence of certain forms of the political conceptualized in terms of the prevalence of a single language function. In the constitution of actual political practices what we usually encounter is the internal heterogeneity of the practice where various translation strategies trans-act in numerous ways and the primary task of semiotic explanation—which is a form of constitutive, not causal explanation (see Chapter 7)—is to account for the functioning of this practice and its internal heterogeneity as well as its trans-action with other practices. We will illustrate this in Chapter 9 with concrete examples. But even in this theoretical chapter, we could illustrate the point by the following: not every act of, say, emotive public communication entails that we have a totalitarian populist discourse. Usually, the underlying hierarchy of even emotive discourse results in some hybrid discourse which is considerably different than that we might encounter in (often historical) totalitarian regimes. Take, for instance, securitization, which is an increasingly discussed form of discourse in international relations. Although its dominant function is emotive, we can say that it is a mixture or trans-actions among referential and conative communication that constitute a considerably more heterogenous emotive discourse than that of, say, the public communication of Stalinist Soviet Union or the Third Reich during the second half of the Second World War (see also Chapter 9 for more details on securitization).
6.2.2 The Problem of Metonymy and Metaphor and Their Relation to Language Functions

Those familiar with Roman Jakobson’s work on the language functions and his distinction between metaphoric and metonymic poles of language (discourse) probably wonder why metalingual function in Table 6.1 is located within the metonymic (discrete) pole of language rather than metaphoric (continuous). Jakobson had altered his views on that as he developed his array of language functions and was in our view inconsistent when in his earlier work he located metalingual function to the paradigmatic pole of language. We need to clarify this since it has significant consequences also for conceptualizing democracy, governance, and power and the accompanying poles of problematization and de-problematization of the political.

One of the few places where Jakobson discusses “language functions” and “poles of language” in the same work is his “Two aspects of Language” (1956). Yet in this paper—and this is extremely important!—he does not (yet) distinguish six functions of language, but is discussing only one of them, the “metalinguistic” function and its link to metaphoric/metonymic poles of language. The mistake made among others by one of us (Selg 2010) is directly related to this link. Namely, Selg interprets Jakobson (1956) as locating metalinguistic operations to the metonymic pole of language (p. 5), when, in fact, he in this paper locates them to the metaphoric pole. But we want to argue here that Jakobson’s locating metalinguistic operation to the metaphoric pole of language in 1956 makes little sense in view of his discussion of metalingual function of language in his seminal “Linguistics and poetics” (1960) when he did differentiate between six functions of language. Initially, we could point out that the reason for the exegetical missteps to enter Selg’s discussion in the 2010 papers is that he had read Jakobson’s 1956 piece through the lenses of his 1960 piece and presumed consistency between the two works where in fact there wasn’t any. Consequently, a theory that unites these two aspects of Jakobson’s thought—poles of language and functions of language—cannot be deduced directly from Jakobson, but must at least partly be created. In this subsection, however, we want to argue for the statement made above: that it makes little sense to locate metalingual function of language to the metaphoric pole of language (as in Jakobson 1956) in view of his discussions from 1960.
Crucial for this argument is the distinction made in Jakobson’s 1960 paper between *metalingual* and *poetic* function. Outlining this distinction, Jakobson brings in his poles of selection (= metaphoric in Jakobson [1956]) and combination (= metonymic in Jakobson [1956]) as follows: “The selection is produced on the base of equivalence, similarity and dissimilarity, synonymity and antonymity, while the combination, the build up of a sequence is based on contiguity” (Jakobson 1960, p. 358). Deriving from this distinction, he defines the poetic function as follows: “The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination. Equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence (Jakobson 1960, p. 358, italics his). He is, however, quick to forestall a possible objection to this specification:

It may be objected that metalanguage also makes a sequential use of equivalent units when combining synonymous expressions into an equational sentence: $A = A$ (“Mare is the female of the horse”). Poetry and metalanguage, however, are in diametrical opposition to each other: in metalanguage the sequence is used to build an equation, whereas in poetry the equation is used to build a sequence. (Jakobson 1960, p. 358)

In light of this “diametrical opposition” from Jakobson (1960) and the remarks that located metalinguistic operation to the metaphoric pole in Jakobson (1956) the following conundrum emerges: on the one hand: (1) the utterance “Mare is the female of the horse” (a) is not poetic, but metalingual operation, since (b) the sequence is used to build an equation; but (c) it is metaphoric in the sense of Jakobson (1956). On the other hand: (2) the utterance “Mare is a fair share for the mayor” is (a) not metalingual, but poetic operation, since (b) equation—based on the similarity of pronunciation—is used to build a sequence; but (c) it is metonymic in the sense of Jakobson (1956) since poetic and metalingual operations are in diametrical opposition according to Jakobson (1960). The only way out of this impasse is to replace 1c with 2c and vice versa—which would, of course, mean contradicting Jakobson (1956). But we want to argue that it would make sense.

What is expanded in the metalingual sentence “Mare is the female of the horse” is the syntagmatic-metonymic sequence of contiguous elements, whereas in the poetic equation (“Mare is a fair share for the mayor”) the same holds for paradigmatic equivalences based on similarity in pronunciation. In the former sentence, the substitutability of “Mare” decreases
(the effect of metonymic moves), in the latter it increases (characteristic of metaphoric moves). Thus, it could be interpreted that in his later conception (1960) Jakobson reserved the metonymic pole of language for metalinguistic function, departing from his earlier view (1956). This is further corroborated by the changes entering his views on the relation between “object language” and “metalanguage.” In 1956, referring to Alfred Tarski, he sees them in terms of substitution: “Similarity in meaning connects the symbols of a metalanguage with the symbols of the language referred to. Similarity connects a metaphorical term with the term for which it is substituted” (1956, p. 81). Yet in an intermediate paper from 1959, referring to Niels Bohr, he sees the relation between object-language and metalanguage as complementary:

Thus, metalanguage is not in a relation of substitution, but rather in a relation of contiguity with the object-language in Jakobson later view. In light of those remarks and taking into account that there cannot be “pure” manifestations of those functions, we could say that metalingual operation is the most metonymically oriented among the language functions as it was indicated in Table 6.1.

### 6.3 Conclusion

Now that we have presented the six ideal-typical categories for political semiotic analysis of the political in terms of power, governance, and democracy, we have to take up the issue of what semiotic analysis is in more detail. In the next chapter, we argue that it is a form of constitutive explanation that entail not deductive research logic that has been—for the sake of expository simplicity—been adopted in this chapter, but abductive research logic which is inextricably linked to the notion of constitutive explanation and, in turn, to relational approach to the political.
Notes

1. The analysis conducted in this chapter is partly based on Selg (2010).
2. The war in Iraq started on March 20, 2003, that is almost three weeks after this statement.
3. John McCain was the official presidential candidate of the Republicans in 2008.
4. The leading conservative radio-anchor in the USA, reaching about 35 million people.
5. Note that in Jakobson (1960), instead of “metalinguistic” the term “metalingual” is used, as indicated above.

References


CHAPTER 7

Political Semiotics as a Constitutive Explanation and Abductive Research Logic

In the first chapter, we argued that the specificity of a relational approach is presuming relations to be constitutive of elements between/among whom the relations are, rather than just something added to them. In addition, we have argued throughout the chapters thus far that the gist of trans-actional perspective on (social) reality is that the elements and their relations can be considered separately, but not as being separate. In the previous two chapters, we proposed a theory of political semiotics as a relational theory of the political. What are the methodological implications of this theory? What kind of arguments from the viewpoint of research logic does it entail? And how is semiotics related to that? These are the topics of the current chapter.

7.1 Constitutive Explanation and Causal Explanation

We open up the meaning of “constitutive relations” from the vantage point of methodology and research design. In other words, we discuss the notion of “constitutive explanation” and show how it entails abductive research logic contrary to inductive or deductive logics that are characteristic of standard understandings of causal explanation. Here we rely
on discussions in metaphysics (Dasgupta 2017; Baker 1997; Kaiser and
Krickel 2017) philosophy of the social sciences (e.g., Searle 1995; Wendt
1998, 1999; Ylikoski 2012; Timmermans and Tavory 2012) and that
of the natural sciences (Ylikoski 2013; Harbecke 2015; Craver 2007;
Baumgartner and Casini 2017). As in these discussions, we explicate
constitutive explanation with its concomitant abductive logic of research
by distinguishing them from hugely debated and analyzed causal expla-
nation and the deductive/inductive logic of research it entails. We argue
that constitutive explanation entails abductive research logic that cannot
be reduced to deductive hypotheses testing or inductive generalizations
and show that it is in that sense that semiotics can be considered
explanatory research, not just conceptual (re)description as it is often
charged of being. We start our discussion with causal explanation that
informs the mainstream of the social sciences which we view in terms of
inter-actionalism or variable-centered approaches.¹

7.1.1 Causal Explanation—The “Art of Separation”
The communitarian political philosopher Michael Walzer (1984) has a
figure of “art of separation” for characterizing liberal political philosophy
since the early modern period till the works of John Rawls:

I suggest that we think of liberalism as a certain way of drawing the map
of the social and political world. The old, preliberal map showed a largely
undifferentiated land mass, with rivers and mountains, cities and towns,
but no borders. ‘Every man is a piece of the continent,’ as John Donne
wrote – and the continent was all of a piece. Society was conceived as
an organic and integrated whole. It might be viewed under the aspect of
religion, or politics, or economy, or family, but all these interpenetrated one
another and constituted a single reality. Church and state, church-state and
university, civil society and political community, dynasty and government,
office and property, public life and private life, home and shop: each pair
was, mysteriously or unmysteriously, two-in-one, inseparable. Confronting
this world, liberal theorists preached and practiced an art of separation.
They drew lines, marked off different realms, and created the sociopolitical
map with which we are still familiar. The most famous line is the “wall”
between church and state, but there are many others. Liberalism is a world
of walls, and each one creates a new liberty. (1984, p. 315)
Not succumbing to any nostalgia for the preliberal world or its ideology, Walzer nevertheless wants to point to certain peculiarities of what more generally has been referred to as “methodology of liberalism” (Lamont 2006, p. 233). For instance:

The goal that liberalism sets for the art of separation – every person within his or her own circle – is literally unattainable. The individual who stands wholly outside institutions and relationships and enters into them only when he or she chooses and as he or she chooses: This individual does not exist and cannot exist in any conceivable social world. (Walzer 1984, p. 324)

This figure is a useful way to reflect on important issues in social research too. We could say that causal analysis is “the art of separation” in social explanation. The more separately the elements of the explanation are considered the stronger the explanation is considered to be. Here is what we mean.

One of the most influential social science methodologists of the past decade John Gerring has proposed “unified frameworks” for causal arguments (2005, 2012a, Chapter 9). His frameworks are informed by what he calls “minimal definition” of causality, first framed in probabilistic terms: “Minimally, causes may be said to refer to events or conditions that raise the probability of some outcome occurring (under ceteris paribus conditions). X may be considered a cause of Y if (and only if) it raises the probability of Y” (Gerring 2005, p. 169, italics in the original). Later he puts it in more generic terms:

...to say that a factor, X, is a cause of an outcome, Y, is to say that a change in X generates a change in Y relative to what Y would otherwise be (the counterfactual condition), given certain background conditions (ceteris paribus assumptions) and scope-conditions (the population of the inference). (Gerring 2012a, p. 199)

It is important that for Gerring his minimal definition “covers all meanings of the word cause in social science settings” (2005, p. 169) and that the criteria of good causal arguments he proposes are “criteria pertaining to all causal arguments” (2012a, p. 198). To put it in terms of contemporary debates on causation, he argues that we have the same underlying meaning of causation no matter whether we interpret it in counterfactual terms in the tradition of Max Weber (1949; see also...
Morgan and Winship 2015), regularity-based approaches to causality (Ragin 1998), probabilistic-correlational accounts (Best and Wolf [eds.] 2014; Berk 2004), mechanistic (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010), process tracing (Waldner 2012; Gerring 2006, Chapter 8; George et al. 2005) or interventionist/manipulationist accounts of causation (Woodward 2003). And this does not even matter that all these perspectives have shortcomings and are “partial” in their understanding of causality (see Reiss 2009). The criteria offered by Gerring are meant to pertain to all of them, and it is this way that the “partial” accounts of causality are integrated into a unified framework whose criteria serve as methodological benchmarks for evaluating the quality of empirical causal analyses. The criteria of assessment are the following (Gerring 2012a, pp. 202–217):

1. **Clarity**: which is the specification of the “variation on X and Y, the background conditions, and the scope-conditions of the argument” (p. 203). This also includes the issue of operationalization of X and Y, and the specification of counterfactuals (p. 205).
2. **Manipulability**: to what extent is X manipulable?
3. **Separation**: “How separable is X relative to Y?” (p. 203).
4. **Independence**: “Is X independent of other causes of Y?” (ibid.).
5. **Impact**: “How much of the variation in Y can X explain? Is the causal effect significant (in theoretical or policy terms)?”.
6. **Mechanism**: “How does X generate Y? What are the causal mechanisms (M)?”.

Here, the “art of separation” is all over the place: not only the criterion of “separation” itself but also “manipulability” (a crucial gold standard for experimental research design), “independence” (controlling of the “third variables” [cf. Emirbayer 1997, p. 289]), “mechanism” (the intermediary variable) would not make sense if X and Y could not be considered separately and as being separate. Thus, as one of us has argued, Dewey and Bentley’s reflection on inter-actionalism (1949, pp. 113–114) articulates the tacit epistemology and ontology presumed by Gerring’s methodological criteria (see Selg 2019 for details).

Now, Gerring is not the only influential social science methodologist who in recent years has taken up the task of providing generic principles for social research on causality (see also King et al. 1994; the contributions in Morgan [ed.] 2013). But Gerring’s attempt is remarkable in
that it can be used as an indicator of the entire discourse of causality in social science methodology that we interpret here as essentially the core of the inter-actionalist perspective on the social in Dewey and Bentley’s sense. He points out that the criteria he provides are not contested understandings of what causality is, but rather work as (ceteris paribus) standards for preferring one causal argument over another. The clearer the argument the better, the more manipulable the input or independent variable, the better, the more separated X and Y are, the better, etc. (adding the usual ceteris paribus at every step, of course). The criteria might in practice lead to trade-offs, but they are all relevant in assessing causal research—whether causation is understood primarily in mechanistic terms or correlational terms, regularity or counterfactual terms, etc.

Thus, causal explanation is “the art of separation,” we argue. But what kind of explanation would fit best with relational approaches that try to consider phenomena to be explained (explananda) separately, but not as being separate from the phenomena that explain them (explanantia)? Here is where constitutive explanation steps in.

7.1.2 Constitutive Explanation—The Art of Considering “Separately, but Not as Being Separate”

Both causal and constitutive arguments are engaged in tracing and demonstrating counterfactual dependencies (Ylikoski 2012, 2013; Craver 2007; Wendt 1998, 1999). It is in this sense in particular that not only causal, but also constitutive arguments can be considered explanations, not “mere descriptions” (cf. Gerring 2012b). But the counterfactual dependencies both explanations are looking for or appealing to are different even if both can be expressed verbally through propositions that contain the conjunction “because” in them. Dasgupta uses a simple example:

Why is there a table here? One answer: Because someone put it there yesterday. Another answer: Because there are pieces of wood arranged table-wise. These answers are not in competition. The first has to do with the causal history that led to the table being here; the second explains what it is about the current situation that makes it the case that there is a table here. The former is called a causal explanation, the latter a constitutive explanation. (Dasgupta 2017, p. 75)
We could even follow Dasgupta in saying that constitutive explanation appeals to the “ground” of the phenomena to be explained, while causal explanation appeals to some combination of events and condition that lead to certain phenomena. Of course, this is a simplification, since in the social sciences often appeals are not to concrete events, but tendencies, mechanisms, or regularities. Nevertheless, the figure (rather than a concept) of “ground” attunes us to thinking of the “underlying” element that is not intelligible outside the relationship with the element that it “underlies.” In principle, the phenomena to be explained (the *explananda*) could be events not only in causal but also in constitutive explanations: we could say that in order for there to have been an event of burning down a particular house there are certain “grounds” for this event that make it possible in the first place (e.g., the existence of oxygen), not only events (e.g., occurrence of lightning, someone’s playing with matches and the like). But it is more common division in the discussions of philosophy of science that the phenomenon to be explained by a causal explanation is an event (some change in Y), while the “outcome” to be explained by constitutive explanation is some capacity (including causal capacity), disposition, property, status, or even identity (of Y). The metaphor of “ground” might bring this point home more smoothly: when we are appealing to the “grounds” of “the Cold War,” then we are appealing to military power balances, ideas and ideologies, economic regimes, etc. that made up or made possible “the Cold War” in its particular form. These are counterfactual dependencies: we argue that if it weren’t for these military power balances, ideas and ideologies, etc. then there would not have been “the Cold War” (at least in this particular form). “The Cold war” cannot be considered as being separate from those power balances, ideas and ideologies, economic regimes, etc. When we are appealing to the *causes* of “Cold War” (or causes for its end for that matter) we have in mind a particular chain of events leading back to the aftermath of the Second World War, etc. Again, these are counterfactual dependencies, but they are presumed to have happened *before* “the Cold War” and they are presumed to exist *separately* and *independently* from “the Cold War”—the two conditions that would not make much sense in case of appealing to “grounds” like in constitutive explanations. Thus, according to Wendt: “The factors constituting a Cold War do not exist apart from a Cold War, nor do they precede it in time; when they come into being, a Cold War comes into being with them, by definition and at the same time” (1998, p. 106). Wendt is misleading (and somewhat
self-contradictory) in his choice of vocabulary when he argues that “The relationship between the factors constituting the social kind ‘Cold War’ and a Cold War is one of identity, in the sense that those factors define what a Cold War is, not one of causal determination” (ibid.). Constitution is definitely not identity to paraphrase the title of an important paper in this respect (Baker 1997). If it were, then constitutive explanations would amount to tautology. In one of the most influential accounts of constitutive rules John Searle set the structure of the latter in the form of “X counts as Y in C” and explicitly pointed out that not only identity of X and Y, but even X’s sufficiency for being Y is inappropriate for constitutive rules:

it would not be a statement of a constitutive rule to say “objects that are designed and used to be sat on by one person count as chairs,” because satisfying the X term is already sufficient for satisfying the Y term, just from the definition of the word “chair.” The “rule” does not add anything but a label, so it is not a constitutive rule. (Searle 1995, p. 44)

So, constituting a phenomenon or being constitutive of a phenomenon means always to a certain extent creating something else from that phenomenon, by adding a new status to it that is not derived from the phenomenon itself. Therefore, constituting amounts to making some X count as a Y which is not contained in the X in a first place, let alone being identical to X. While it is true that the power balances, ideas, etc. that constitute Cold War, do not cause it, there is nothing identical between them either. Analogously: a chunk of marble (partly) constitutes the statue of David, not (partly) causes it—but nevertheless, the chunk of marble and the statue of David are not identical (see Baker 1997), even if the material of them is. So, Wendt is misguided in using the notion of “identity” here. However, he is right that from the fact that constitutive explanations violate the temporal priority and independent and separate existence of X and Y presumed by causal explanation, it follows “that the ‘independent variable/dependent variable’ language that characterizes causal inquiries makes no sense, or at least must be interpreted very differently, in constitutive inquiries” (Wendt 1998, p. 106; 1999, pp. 84–85). In other words, the core of inter-actionalism as we have described it—seeing relations as “happening” between or among independently existing entities—is more or less senseless from the viewpoint of constitutive theory.
And of course, given the characterization of trans-actionalism by Dewey and Bentley (1949, pp. 101–102) we discussed in the first chapter, we can say that they argue for an approach that would not conceive X and Y as being conceivable separately from their relation(s) and their relations as being something “added” to them or being yet another “element” to be analyzed. Avoiding attributing “essences” to entities and avoiding isolating them from relations as we approach them follows naturally from the very idea of constitutive relations. Thus, constitutive theorizing or explanation is trans-actionalist.

In a footnote to this delineation of trans-actionalism just quoted Dewey and Bentley make a remarkable comment which basically captures the difference between inter-actionalism and trans-actionalism: “It should be fairly well evident that when ‘things’ are too sharply crystallized as ‘elements,’ [as in causal or inter-actionalist arguments] then certain leftovers, namely, the ‘relations,’ present themselves as additional ‘things,’ and from that pass on to becoming a variety of ‘elements’ themselves, as in many current logics” (p. 102, note 9). Such reducing of relations to “additional ‘things’ … that pass on to becoming a variety of ‘elements’ themselves” is more or less the core of variable-centered approach or inter-actionalism. For instance, statistically defined relations, such as covariation or its standardized form, correlation, are ‘elements’ themselves among variables (other ‘elements’) of the inter-action. This holds for the majority of statistics used for analyzing cross-case data and for cross-case research design in more general. But even within-case data and design can be treated either inter-actionally or trans-actionally. To be sure the tradition of variable-centered approach—inter-actionalism—has produced quite a massive amount of discussion on “process tracing” as one of the key contributions of case study research for explicating the causal mechanisms that are responsible for the connection between causal factor (X) and the outcome (Y) (see Bennett and Checkel [eds.] 2015 for recent mapping of these debates). Nevertheless, both the “process” and the “tracing” are made sense in terms of variables. Gerring’s most influential work Case study research (2006) could be used as an indicator, since, as is usual in his works, he tries to extract from the entire debate on the topic in the social sciences the principles for it in general. He says something very significant about “process tracing” which is the part of case study that is a primary procedure for increasing internal validity of causal inferences: “The hallmark of process tracing, in my view, is that multiple types of evidence are employed for the verification of a single inference – bits and pieces of
evidence that embody different units of analysis (they are each drawn from unique populations). Individual observations are therefore noncomparable” (ibid., p. 173). This means that even though “pieces of evidence are relevant to the central argument (they are not ‘random’), but they do not comprise observations in a larger sample. They are more correctly understood as a series of N = 1 (one-shot) observations” (ibid., p. 178). Those familiar with Dewey and Bentley’s Knowing and the Known, which could as well be seen as a treatise on observation, cannot help but notice something very familiar in these formulations by Gerring about “process tracing” (also known as “causal-process observation” [Gerring 2006, p. 173; 2012a, pp. 328–333]). Dewey and Bentley summarize it as follows:

The current philosophical notion of observation is derived from a psychology of ‘consciousness’ (or some version of the ‘mental’ as an isolate), and it endeavors to reduce what is observed either to some single sensory quality or to some other ‘content’ of such short time-span as to have no connections—except what may be provided through inference as an operation outside of observation. (1949, p. 52)

This is the core of inter-actional understanding of observation. Gerring’s indicative perspective on process tracing as gathering noncomparable “N = 1 (one-shot) observations” for supporting a single (causal) inference is the inter-actional perspective on observation. Dewey and Bentley propose an alternative trans-actional perspective on observation, adopting a procedure that

reports and describes observation on the same basis the worker in knowledge—astronomer, physicist, psychologist, etc.—employs when he makes use of a test observation in arriving at conclusions to be accepted as known. We proceed upon the postulate that knowings are always and everywhere inseparable from the knowns—that the two are twin aspects of common fact. (Dewey and Bentley 1949, p. 52, italics in the original)

The inseparability of knowings and the knowns is actually part of what, in a more contemporary parlance, is captured by the prescription to study not just meaning but meaning in action, a dictum that informs influential contributions to various strands of interpretive social sciences that are actually one of the important sources of trans-actionalist approaches (although without using this vocabulary), especially when it comes to the studies of power, governance and democracy (see Selg 2016, p. 198;
The reason interpretive approaches set out to grasp “meaning in action” is that “its analysis of beliefs treats them as constitutive of actions and as holistic in nature” (Rhodes 2017, p. 18, italics added) and presumes “that beliefs and practices are constitutive of each other” (ibid., p. 19, italics added). For instance, ethnographic study of symbols is not merely an attempt to describe people’s understandings of reality: “Symbols do not simply ‘represent’ or reflect political ‘reality’, they actively constitute that reality” (ibid., p. 67, italics added). In fact, this is exactly what Wendt has in mind when he points out that one of the reasons we should see constitutive theorizing as an explanation, rather than just description, is that otherwise, we contribute to “the ‘reification’ or ‘naturalization’ of social kinds, in the sense that it obscures the extent to which they are ongoing social constructions and encourages us instead to see them as if they were like natural kinds, the character of which is independent of what human beings think and do” (Wendt 1998, pp. 108–109). In one of the essential resource papers on trans-actional approaches to relational sociology, Dépelteau sees a “major task and challenge” for it in “get[ting] rid of any reifying concept, expression, and form of thinking” (2008, p. 62). Wendt gives the example of reifying Cold War through ignoring the constitutive role of ideas and argues that “in saying that ideas ‘describe’ the Cold War we do not get a sense that they generated or produced the Cold War, that but for certain shared ideas the Cold War would not have existed, in short, that they ‘explained’ the Cold War” (1998, p. 108). In other words, this explanation demonstrates that “Cold War” and “certain shared ideas” are in (mutually) constitutive relations. And through such explanation, those relations and the phenomenon itself is de-reified. But what are the more empirical guidelines of research based on such understanding of explanation? One way to respond to this is to analyze what kind of research questions this explanation is meant to answer. This brings us to the relational notion of research design.

### Relational Approach to Research Design: Constitutive and Causal Research Questions

In his comparison of causal and constitutive explanations, Ylikoski brings an example of asking three questions about glass:

1. How did the glass become fragile?
2. What makes the glass fragile?
3. Why did the glass break? (2013, p. 279)
Although only the third one is phrased as a why-question the other two can be reformulated as why-questions too, which makes it clear that they are not descriptive, but explanatory, and ask about counterfactual dependencies: (1) Why did the glass become fragile? (2) Why is the glass fragile? Although all the questions are answerable with propositions containing a conjunction “because,” the first and the third question ask about causal dependence: (1) “about the causal history of the glass” or “the crucial features of the process that led to the object being fragile rather than robust” (ibid.); and (3) “about the triggering cause” or “the event that made the glass to fulfill its potential to break” (ibid.). These questions ask for causal explanations.

It is the second question that asks for a constitutive explanation: “It asks what gives the glass the causal capacity to break, and the answer will tell us something about the things that the glass is made of” (e.g., about molecules and their bonds)” (ibid., italics added). Explaining something through what that something is made of cannot presume that the explanans/explanantia and the explanandum/explananda are “independent existences” (to use the Humean term about the constituents of causal relations). For them, the dictum “separately, but not as being separate” applies. As we have pointed out (see Selg 2016, 2018, 2019), this dictum can be considered the sufficient element of trans-actional approaches. The two necessary elements are presuming phenomena (power, actor, money, etc.) to be (1) relations; and (2) that exist in practice. “Practice” is, of course, a social scientifically inclined term. A general term would be “process.” Here we can briefly look how constitutive explanation is trans-actional in the sense we just outlined.

When it comes to social things or kinds “like money, the state, and international society [then they] are made largely of ideas” (Wendt 1998, p. 103, italics added). This means that asking the second kind of question above—“What makes Y Z?” or “Why is Y Z?”—would expect an answer in terms of constitutive explanation that appeals not to the molecular structure that makes certain properties of a substance possible, but to a social structure that makes certain properties of a social kind possible. And while constitutive “molecular structure” is not a separate entity, but a synonym for “molecules and their bonds” (Ylikoski 2013, p. 79), then constitutive “social structure” is none other than a synonym for “the set of relationships with other actors that define a social kind as such” (Wendt 1998, p. 113). This is the “made of” part, which is well in tune with the
sufficient (“separately, but not as being separate”) element of the transactional approach. What about the necessary conditions? Condition (1) is quite clear since it is evident that social kinds explained in and explained through constitutive explanations are (made of) relations, and unlike with the *relata* of causal relations, these kinds are what they are in virtue of those relations. But what about the second element (2)—the presumption that the phenomena to be explained exist in/as processes or practices (i.e., not as static objects). It seems as though the analysts of constitutive explanation are arguing exactly the opposite:

the relation of constitution is *synchronous*: constitution does not take time. Similarly, if changes in the basis give rise to changes in the causal capacities of the system, these changes take place in the same instant. Thus it does not make sense to talk about processes in the case of constitution. While causal processes take time, constitution does not. (Ylikoski 2013, p. 282, italics in the original)

[Property theories⁴ are static. Their goal is to show how the properties of a system are constituted. The systems whose properties they explain may be dynamic, and indeed *all* systems, natural and social, are always in process, continually being reproduced through time even if they do not change. But constitutive theories abstract away from these processes and take ‘snapshots’ instead, in an effort to explain how systems are constituted. (Wendt 1998, p. 105, italics in the original)

Yet there is nothing necessary in the conclusions of either Ylikoski or Wendt that constitutive explanation/theory cannot be *diachronic* and capture the process of constitution as a whole in time. When Ylikoski argues that ontologically it makes no sense to talk about processes in the case of constitution it is not an argument that constitution is “timeless” or “eternal” as some sort of platonic “form”: it is an argument that the relata of the constitutive relation (the one(s) constituting and the one(s) constituted in the relation) do not exist in separate moments of time, as is presumed in case of cause and effect in causal relations. Wendt’s methodological proposal that constitutive theories abstract away from processes and take ‘snapshots’ is quite arbitrary and basically would evoke the question: “How many snapshots one needs to take to have a movie?”.

But we could even put this issue at the ontological level and argue that constitutive relations are processual or presume the “primacy of process”
that Dépelteau considered one of the cornerstones of relational thinking: (2008, p. 62). For this, we have to recall that in his discussion of social objects for whose existence constitutive rules are essential, John Searle, again, argues that

The grammar of the noun phrases conceals from us the fact that, in such cases, process is prior to product. Social objects are always… constituted by social acts; and, in a sense, the object is just the continuous possibility of the activity. A twenty dollar bill, for example, is a standing possibility of paying for something. (1995, p. 36, italics in the original)

Since, as already specified above making social facts out of brute facts involves collective-intentional acceptance of constitutive rules whose general formula is “X counts as Y in Z” and because the

features specified by the X term are insufficient to guarantee success in fulfilling the assigned function, there must be continued collective acceptance or recognition of the validity of the assigned function; otherwise the function cannot be successfully performed. It is not enough, for example, that we agree with the original assignment, “This stuff is money”; we must continue to accept it as money or it will become worthless. (ibid., p. 45)

And there is no reason why a constitutive explanation cannot trace the counterfactual dependency of this kind where the constitutive relation is that of “continued collective acceptance or recognition of the validity of the assigned function.” Studying what makes some stuff money should not be the only role of constitutive explanation, but in addition, the continuation and changes of this making could be too. Or even more importantly so. In fact, trans-actional understanding of research makes it unequivocally clear, given its processual orientation.

Now that we have established that relational approach (trans-actionalism) entails constitutive explanation, whereas the variable-centered approach requires causal explanation, it is necessary to take up the issue of logical inference under scrutiny which corresponds to those forms of explanations. We argue in the next section that the “art of separation” of causal analysis presumes deductive or inductive research logic, while the “art of considering separately, but not as being separate” of constitutive explanation is necessary based on abductive logical inference.
7.2 Why Constitutive Explanation Entails Abductive Research Logic?

7.2.1 Deductive, Inductive, and Abductive Reasoning

We start with a somewhat technical exposition of three different logics and then move to a more general outline of the methodological consequences of our central claim. The latter, in a nutshell, is the following: abductive reasoning views theory and observations as interdependent rather than dependent or independent as do deductive and inductive forms of reasoning or logic. Let us first look at deduction. It has a general rule or a theory as one of his premises and at least one observation as another premise

Premise₁: All men are mortal.
Premise₂: Socrates is a man.

Important here is that the general theory in Premise₁ is presumed to hold independently of the observation in Premise₂. In addition, the observation in Premise₂ is also presumed to hold independently of the theory in Premise₁. Now, if the deductive inference is made logically correctly, then the conclusion is neither a general theory, nor an observation, but what we could call a particular theory about the observation:

Conclusion: Socrates is mortal.

The mortality of Socrates is not observed in this reasoning but inferred from the relationship of general theory and the observation in the premises. Of course, there could be more than one observation in deductive reasoning. Noteworthy, however, is that in this kind of reasoning both the observation and the general theory have an identity (truth-value, meaning) independent from one another, they can be considered as being separate from each other. In fact, even the particular theory in the conclusion has a truth-value and meaning—identity—that is independent of the general theory and the observation in the premises. It is inferred from the premises, but the inference is not constitutive of the identity of the conclusion. This can be explained by the simple fact that the same conclusion can be reached from different deductive reasoning:
Premise$_1$: All the husbands of Xanthippe are mortal.
Premise$_2$: Socrates is a husband of Xanthippe.
Conclusion: Socrates is mortal.

Here we can point to an elementary fact that deductive logic does not say anything about the factual truth of the propositions that are used in the reasoning. A logically correct argument can be built up of 100% false propositions:

Premise$_1$: All wives of Plato are immortal.
Premise$_2$: Socrates is a wife of Plato.
Conclusion: Socrates is immortal.

The reason we cover this elementary point here is that such underdetermination of factual truth in deductive logic stems from the fact that the identities of its premises containing a general theory and (an) observation(s) and its conclusion containing a particular theory about the observation are independent from each other.

Inductive reasoning has the same independence relationship between theories and observations. Only its direction is reversed, since it does not have any general theories in its premises, but infers the theory from observations:

Premise$_1$: Socrates is a man and mortal.
Premise$_2$: Plato is a man and mortal.
Conclusion: All men are mortal.

Of, course, there could be numerous observations. Generally, we could say that the structure of induction is:

All observed A are C.
Therefore, all A are C.

It is important that although the multiplication of observations makes the inductive inference more certain “the very definitions of A and C and the connection between them cannot themselves be explained by induction” (Timmermans and Tavory 2012, p. 171). The reason, again, for that is that theory in the conclusion and the observations in the premises
are presumed to have an identity (truth-value, meaning) independently from each other. We move from independence to mutual dependence or interdependence between theories and observations, when we consider abduction, often referred to (with good reasons) also as retroduction by its modern formulator Charles Sanders Peirce. Its general logical structure is the following:

1. The surprising fact C is observed.
2. But if A were true, C would be a matter of course.
3. Hence, there is reason to suspect that A is true.

(CP 5.189)\(^5\)

Note that this reasoning starts with neither independent observation, nor theory, but with their interdependence: the observed fact C can only be surprising in view of the background knowledge or theory one has. In that sense, C’s identity is what it is in view of this background knowledge/theory, which we could refer to as K (from the word “knowledge”). In that sense, observation is not presumed to be independent, but already knowledge/theory-laden. The second step in this reasoning is not, again, neither an input of independent observation, nor theory, but their interdependence: the observed surprising fact C would be unsurprising—“a matter of course”—in view of A. Usually the A under question is considered a theory, but it could as well be another observation or set of observations. The final step in this reasoning, again, is putting forth a proposition whose identity (meaning, truth-value) cannot be considered as being separate from the identities of the propositions in the previous steps: it puts forth a suspicion that A is true, given that we have an observation C that is surprising, given our background knowledge K. Note that there is interdependence of theory and observation at all the three steps in this reasoning: (1) C is surprising in virtue of its relation to K; and K is false (or at least lacking in explanatory or predictive capacity) in virtue of its relation to C; (2) C is a matter of course in virtue of its relation to A; and A is suspected to be true for the reason that it would make C a matter of course; and (3) Finally, even A and K are interdependent through their interdependence with C: the reason A is suspected to be true, is that in virtue of its relation to K C is surprising, entailing a need to suspect that A is true since it would make C unsurprising or a matter of course. To
render those interdependencies more accessible, let us consider a trivial example of abductive reasoning:

1. A surprising fact C is observed that Socrates is dead. What could be the sources of surprise here? Let us put forth a “theory” or background knowledge K in view of which C is surprising: All men are immortal and Socrates is a man. K is ridiculous but in its robustness, it helps bring out concisely why Socrates’s death is a surprising fact.

2. If another theory A were true, that all men are mortal and Socrates is a man, then C would be a matter of course (at least from the viewpoint of 2020 A. D).

3. Hence, there is a reason to suspect that A is true: All men are immortal and Socrates is a man.

Note that the fact of Socrates’s death C is interdependent with K since in virtue of its relation to K it is surprising: if all men are immortal, then Socrates’s death is puzzling, or surprising. Therefore, K can be considered false (or lacking in explanatory capacity), since it cannot explain or otherwise contain the fact of Socrates’s death. The theory A that all men are mortal would make C an unsurprising fact, and in that sense C is a matter of course in virtue of its relation to A. And since the reason to suspect that A is true is exactly that it would make C unsurprising and the surprising character of it comes from its relation to K, we can say that A and K also mutually dependent: the falsity of the theory K that all men are immortal comes not from the alternative theory A that all men are mortal—this would be just putting forth alternative theories. It comes from the fact that the observation of Socrates’s death C is surprising according to K and unsurprising according to A. And the same holds to the suspicion of A’s truth. So, there is an interdependence of A-C-K throughout the reasoning. Now, let us put the three logics in perspective when it comes to social research.

Comparing it with induction, the reasoning that is usually conflated with abduction, since the end result of both could be a general rule, Peirce states that abduction “makes its start from the facts, without, at the outset, having any particular theory in view, though it is motivated by the feeling that a theory is needed to explain the surprising facts” (CP 7.218). It is instructive here to notice that theory for Peirce means explanation—a view that is quite contested these days. Theory has very
different meanings besides explanation: world-view, empirical generalization, interpretation and so on (see Abend 2008; Selg 2013). For Peirce, theory is an explanation. Otherwise, the main difference between induction and abduction as it is rendered by Peirce would not make much sense: “Abduction seeks a theory. Induction seeks for facts” (Peirce: CP 7.218). In terms of the examples above, the statement “All men are mortal” (as a conclusion of inductive reasoning) is not a “theory” in Peirce’s sense, but a (general) fact. But it would be a theory if we included empirical generalization (and not only explanation) among the meaning of theory. And this has been done in one of the most explicitly abductively oriented expositions of social science methodology thus far by Glynos and Howarth (2007; but see also Tavory and Timmermans 2014). They explain via Peirce that strictly speaking neither from deductive nor inductive reasoning stem any new theories when faced with data: “[f]rom the inductive view, this is because theories are simply summarized projections of these data, while from the deductive perspective they are derived from a law or an axiom. Retroduction, by contrast, moves from data to hypothesis to laws” (Glynos and Howarth 2007, p. 26). What is at stake here, is that though “deductive reasoning purports to prove what is the case, and inductive reasoning purports to approximate what is the case, retroduction reasoning conjectures what is the case” (Glynos and Howarth 2007, p. 26). The “conjectural” character of abduction takes us further to another point that has thus far only been hinted to, namely:

In just the same way [as with “proof” and “judgment”], the word abduction may be used both to refer to a finished product, the abductive explanation, or to an activity, the abductive process that led to that abductive explanation. These two uses are closely related. An abductive process produces an abductive explanation as its product, but the two are not the same. (Aliseda 2006, p. 32)

Aliseda points out that the “notion of a ‘best abductive explanation’ necessarily involves contextual aspects, varying from application to application” (ibid., p. 33). She provides us with a picture of the mainstream of the philosophy of science which “has focused on abduction and explanation as products rather than a process, just as it has done for other epistemic notions. Aristotle, Mill, and in this century, the influential philosopher of science Carl Hempel, all based their accounts of explanation on proposing criteria to characterize its products” (ibid., p. 38).
The processual character of abduction is captured by Clifford Geertz when he envisions his overall picture of the social scientific study of meaning-systems or cultures in his project of ‘thick description’:

Studies do build on other studies, not in the sense that they take up where the others leave off, but in the sense that, better informed and better conceptualized, they plunge more deeply into the same things. ... but the movement is not from already proven theorems to newly proven ones, it is from an awkward fumbling for the most elementary understanding to a supported claim that one has achieved that and surpassed it. A study is an advance if it is more incisive... than those that preceded it; but it less stands on their shoulders than, challenged and challenging, runs by their side. (Geertz 2001, p. 25)

He draws explicit parallels with medical diagnostics when he specifies his notion of ‘theory’: “it is not, at least in the strict meaning of the term, predictive. The diagnostician doesn’t predict measles; he decides that someone has them, or at the very most anticipates that someone is rather likely shortly to get them” (ibid., p. 26) In a similar vein for Glynos and Howarth (2007, p. 47): “explanation in social science is closely tied to the context of discovery, thereby making retroduction central to it.” Discussing their specific view on explanation in the social sciences, they summarize it as follows:

Explanation in this domain involves the furnishing of a putative explanans, whose justification is related to an ability to make intelligible the explanandum under investigation. In this model, the explanandum consists of problematized social phenomena that are always to some degree mediated by existing theoretical structures and by the discursive practices investigated. (Glynos and Howarth 2007, p. 47)

Thus, abduction is a processual movement from puzzling empirical phenomena to theoretical premises making them intelligible and then back to the phenomena through which both the identity of the phenomena as well as the corresponding theoretical premises can change, and the process is never final, since the ‘final’ result itself is a part of the process. This is what Geertz makes a point of with his colorful prose: “Hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts that actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole that motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual
motion, into explications of one another” (1983, p. 69). This interdependency of parts and the whole and the “perpetual motion” of abduction point directly to an important issue: How are constitutive explanation and abductive reasoning related? To be sure, abduction can be used to put forth causal explanation too, as pointed out by Peirce and those who follow him. However, we point to a certain asymmetry here: namely, that constitutive explanation is inherently abductive.

### 7.2.2 Why Is Constitutive Explanation Inherently Abductive?

Probably, the reader has already some insight into the answer of the question in the title of the current subsection; the reason why constitutive explanation cannot be based on either inductive or deductive logic is that the latter are forms of the “art of separation” at the level of reasoning. It was only the abductive reasoning that was based on the interdependency of theoretical and observational aspects. To put this in terms of the discussion of the connection between constitutive and causal inference we have to emphasize that for the latter a gold standard for research design is the experiment and that causal inference can be made sense of in terms of idealized or actual experimental design. Nothing of the sort is possible for constitution. Thus, Baumgartner and Casini (2017) criticize one of the most influential models of constitution in recent decades put forth by Craver (2007) who explicates constitution in terms of the so-called mutual manipulability theory. The bottom line is that for Craver causal relations are unidirectional relations of dependence, while constitutive relations are bidirectional. Nevertheless, both can be modeled in terms of manipulability, which is, as we saw in our discussion of Gerring a critical feature of satisfying causal arguments. Manipulability requires that at least in principle (in an idealized experimental situation) we can imagine how to isolate a causal factor from all the other causal factors and observe whether changing it (increasing/decreasing the dose of a medicine in a patient, amount of a chemical in a solution, electric impulse in laboratory animal, etc.) also changes the outcome. Baumgartner and Casini’s point is that nothing of the sort is imaginable in case of constitutive relations, not even under idealized circumstances “the inference to constitution is inherently underdetermined by experimental evidence” (Baumgartner and Casini 2017, p. 215). The reason is that the components of constitutive dependence can be considered separately, but not
as being separate, while “[c]auses and effects are mereologically independent entities” (ibid., pp. 222–223). This has several consequences as summarized by Baumgartner and Casini:

It is possible to surgically *intervene* on a cause with respect to its effect. Moreover, since it takes time for causal influence to be transmitted from the cause to the effect, an effect can be suppressed via suitable interventions even after the cause has occurred, that is, causal interactions can be *broken*. As a result, cause-effect pairs can, at least in principle, be *isolated* from confounding background influences. It follows that contexts of causal discovery can be idealized to such a degree that crucial experiments become possible that produce unconfounded data providing conclusive evidence for causal dependencies. (ibid., p. 223)

In other words, “there exist *ideal discovery circumstances* in which causal relations can receive unambiguous empirical support” (ibid., p. 223, italics added). No such circumstances exist for constitutive dependency—even ideally—and hence constitutive analysis can never presume the possibility of intervention, breaking the interactions or isolating their constituents:

[E]ven if the hypothesis “X is a constituent of Y” is experimentally tested in isolation (i.e. such that the whole theoretical background is taken to be beyond doubt), no evidence can be produced demonstrating that this hypothesis is true and its negation false. Contrary to the case of causation, there cannot exist an *experimentum crucis* for constitution. Being experimentally underdetermined is an inherent feature of constitutive relations. (Baumgartner and Casini 2017, p. 223)

From this, experimental underdetermination comes a certain pragmatism related to constitutive inference. Although constitutive relations cannot, strictly speaking, be demonstrated, constitutive inference might still be warranted. Constitutive explanation explains not why certain events and conditions lead to other events and conditions, but why certain events and conditions belong together and why it is impossible to de-couple them without turning them into something else. Even if experimental design gives no conclusive evidence for such an explanation, it can give negative information which warrants constitutive inference. Through experimentation, one can explore the possible ways to de-couple a phenomenon and test whether the constitution of the phenomenon changes or not.
Consequently, “if all of these tests [of de-coupling] are unsuccessful, an inference to constitution is warranted” (Baumgartner and Casini 2017, p. 230). But it is important that “such an inference is ultimately grounded in pragmatic considerations concerning explanatory power, and is not forced upon the modeler by the evidence” (ibid., p. 216). Note, that we are talking about experimental or even ideal experimental testing—a setting that has very little relevance in most of the social research where experimentation is almost always ruled out by practical and ethical concerns. But even in this highly idealized situation, constitutive inference is not forced by the evidence, but has to be created or invented and can be tested only in the negative sense. Baumgartner and Casini conclude their argument as follows: “The inference to constitution is thus inherently abductive: constitutional models are preferable over pure causal models because they explain both the highly correlated behavior of phenomena and their constituents as well as the impossibility to de-couple them” (2017, p. 226).

Thus, constitutive explanation and its concomitant abductive research logic is processual and conjectural and can never be conclusively determined by empirical evidence. Nevertheless, in Peirce’s treatment abduction has a very central place in our scientific understanding of the world—be it natural or social sciences. He even explicitly points to different levels of relevance among different disciplines: “In some departments of science, where experimentation is easy, the testing of hypotheses may be performed with some promptitude. In other departments, especially in ancient history, it will extend beyond a human life, so that for the individual the result of the abduction is all that he can hope to live to see” (CP 6.535).

Despite the “merely” conjectural nature of this reasoning, it is worthwhile to use the traditional term “logic” for it, since according to Peirce “abduction, although it is very little hampered by logical rules, nevertheless is logical inference, asserting its conclusion only problematically or conjecturally, it is true, but nevertheless having a perfectly definite logical form” (CP 5.188).

Abduction or retroduction—a kind of reasoning backwards and forwards, from premises to conclusions and from conclusions to premises through which the identity of each is specified—has been called “context-sensitive code-selection” by Wirth (2005, p. 203), an author of the most extensive monograph on abduction in German (see Wirth 1999). As he
explains: “‘reasoning backwards’ [i.e. abductive reasoning] aims at discovering either a singular cause or a general rule, which has to be selected or invented” (2005, p. 203). But this selection or invention has to take into account the interdependency of the elements: not only the observations’ identity is specified through relating them to rules, but the opposite is true as well. And all this is true of constitutive explanation in general. Based on the inherently abductive character of constitutive inference, we can say that the latter amounts to context-sensitive code-selection for making surprising facts unsurprising, or “a matter of course” in Peirce wording. But since this construction of the putative conditions for a fact to be a matter of course is inherently processual, a question arises concerning the theoretical categories in this kind of research and explanation. Here we can take our lead from Glynos and Howarth (2007, p. 47) again:

the process of ‘applying’ theoretical categories such as ‘discourse’ or ‘logics’ to concrete objects does not come off without a remainder. In a manner analogous to Wittgenstein’s analysis of ‘applying a rule’, an application should not be seen in terms of subsuming instances under general rule. Instead, in our terms... such an application ought to be understood as part of a general practice of articulation, in which the sense and meaning of explanatory categories grow organically and contingently in the very process of their application.

Using as an example of their central category, namely ‘discourse’, they state: “There is no reason why this cannot be extended from the ‘empirical periphery’ to the ‘ontological core’ of one’s theoretical edifice, thus showing how even a basic concept such as discourse can acquire new determinations in the process of its application” (ibid., p. 47). Therefore, if we apply concepts like “metaphoric pole,” “discrete coding,” “democratic populism” or “clientelist democracy” or “metagovernance” (as outlined in Chapter 6), then it does not mean subsuming empirical phenomena under the category which itself is determined a priori. And this is true about the Jakobsonian language functions too. Jakobson did not reduce different empirical phenomena under the notion of, say, phatic communication or presented the latter as an empirical generalization based on data. He left the determination of phaticity pretty open. And in fact, an utterance that functions as phatic in one situation, might function as referential in another situation, etc. Let us look at
an example given by Paul Fry (available at his video lectures on literary theory at Yale University: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxnqHukr-Oc). The same utterance “it is raining” can, in practice, exemplify a dominance of all the six categories outlined by Jakobson. This is contingent upon the communicative situation. Thus, it can be (1) emotive: if it is said, for instance, to express anger; (2) phatic: if it is said as part of small talk; (3) poetic: if there is an appeal to rhythm (it-is/rai-ning); (4) conative: if said by a parent to a child implying that the latter should take an umbrella with her; (5) referential: when uttered by a meteorologist stating a fact; and (6) even metalingual when—in a slightly idiosyncratic manner—“it“ is defined by the following formula „it = raining“. In fact, this example indicates that based on the utterance itself one cannot determine which Jakobsonian function is predominant. The determination of prevailing language functions in a communicative act is an empirical matter that cannot be resolved a priori. It is articulated abductively in a dialogue between theoretical model and empirical data and the application of Jakobsonian functions of language do not come off without a remainder. This points to the need of more general explication of why semiotics is a constitutive explanation and how should we use the concrete theoretical categories which we presented in the previous chapter in a deductive manner (see Table 6.1) for the sake of expository simplicity.

7.3 Constructing “a Matter of Course”: Why Semiotics Is a Constitutive Explanation?

Semiotics, as we have argued, is the study of the contingent articulation of meaning in communication. Though we have been putting forth a semiotic theory of hegemony that is based on cultural semiotics whose crucial categories are text and semiosphere (Chapter 5) and added a model for the analysis of the political with reference to Jakobson’s notion of language functions, we can consider first the crucial category for the entire discipline of semiotics since its inception—the category of “sign.” In what sense is a sign, that offhand seems to be a singular entity, a relational phenomenon that needs constitutive explanation? Let’s first explicate this with recourse to the founders of semiotics.

For Saussure “a sign (signe) is the combination of a concept and a sound pattern” or “signified (signifie) and signifier (signifiant)” (1983,
For Peirce, “[a] sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (CP 2.228). An important addition for him is that “[a] sign is only a sign in actu by virtue of its receiving an interpretation, that is, by virtue of its determining another sign of the same object” (CP 5.569). The need for interpretation is a first indication that a sign is not something “given” prior to human cognition and communication. The sign’s need for being related to other signs is, in turn, the first indication that signs are not intelligible in isolation, or that the status of a sign is not fixed or necessary (in the sense of “context-independence”) outside communication (see Eco 1979, especially Chapter 2). This leads to another definition of sign by Peirce, this time with a direct reference to the fact that process of sign what he calls “semiosis” is in principle infinite: “A Sign is anything which is related to a second, its Object, in such a way as to bring a Third thing, its Interpretant, into relation to the same Object, and that in such a way as to bring a Fourth into relation to that Object in the same form, ad infinitum” (CP 2.92). We can move from here to Saussure again, who pointed to the arbitrariness of signs, which for him forms the basis of the study of the social conditions of their relative value, that is their meaning: “the arbitrary nature of the sign enables us to understand more easily why it needs social activity to create a linguistic system. A community is necessary to establish values. Values have no other rationale than usage and general agreement. An individual, acting alone, is incapable of establishing a value” (Saussure 1983, p. 157). In other words: from the beginning, Saussure acknowledges the centrality of social activity for the constitution of signs.

The arbitrariness of signs and its relation to socially constituted value is captured, again, by Peirce despite the fact that seeing his conception as incommensurable with that of Saussure is nearly a century-old tradition within semiotics (see Eco 1979, pp. 14–16 for the most classic overcoming of this frontline). “It is of the nature of a sign,” Peirce writes, and in particular of a sign which is rendered significant by a character which lies in the fact that it will be interpreted as a sign. Of course, nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign; but the character which causes it to be interpreted as referring to its object may be one which might belong to it irrespective of its object and though that object had never existed, or it may be in a relation to its object which it would have just the same whether it were interpreted as a sign or not. (CP 2.308)
The most immediate link from Peirce to Saussure’s notion of arbitrariness could be seen in one of the three major classes of signs as envisioned by Peirce (besides “icons” and “indexes”), namely “symbol”: “A Symbol is a Representamen whose Representative character consists precisely in its being a rule that will determine its Interpretant” (CP 2.292). Using the example of the word “man”, he concedes: “It is a general mode of succession of three sounds or representamens of sounds, which becomes a sign only in the fact that a habit, or acquired law, will cause replicas of it to be interpreted as meaning a man or men” (CP 2.292, italics added). For Peirce, in fact, “symbols” are the most fundamental signs: “A Genuine Sign is a … Symbol, which is a sign which owes its significant virtue to a character which can only be realized by the aid of its Interpretant” (CP 2.92). This means that Peirce’s other two main classes of signs receive their status through conventions: “Icons seem to be based on natural resemblance, but in fact they are determined by semiotic convention” (Culler 2001, p. 27). Hence, we could agree with Culler (ibid.) that “Despite their different points of departure, Saussure and Peirce agree that the task of semiotics is to describe those conventions that underlie even the most ‘natural’ modes of behavior and representation.” Peirce, as already mentioned sees ‘semiosis’ as in principle infinite: “[B]y ‘semiosis’ I mean … an action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant” (CP 5.484). This sheds some light on the centrality of constitutive explanation and abduction in semiotics since “while no Representamen actually functions as such until it actually determines an Interpretant, yet it becomes a Representamen as soon as it is fully capable of doing this; and its Representative Quality is not necessarily dependent upon its ever actually determining an Interpretant, nor even upon its actually having an Object” (CP 2.275). Basically, all the elements of “semiosis” can be considered separately, but not as being separate. Hence only constitutive and processual theories are suitable for explaining this complex process active between representamen and interpretant, taking into account that neither of them is pre-given, but constructed through communication.

Now, what about the semiotic theory of hegemony with its categories of discrete/metonymic and continuous/metaphoric coding, exclusion/antagonism, center/nodal point (“empty signifier”) and the six functions of language (phatic, poetic, conative, referential, metalingual, and emotive) which we tied to different notions of power, governance and democracy (see Table 6.1)? It is our contention that these categories
are meant for constitutive *explanation* of the political, whose constituent elements can be considered separately, but not as being separate. In other words, when we present our analyses in a particular sequence, then this sequence has to describe not only the separate identity of the elements but also explain their mutual constitution. This entails abductive reasoning, or, as referred to above, context-sensitive code-selection for constructing surprising facts as “a matter of course.” For instance, if we see a prime minister as appealing to commonplaces, fears or external enemies in a situation where she was asked about concrete information by an interviewer, then this phatic or emotive communication is a surprising fact C in view of our background knowledge K (which would presume a referential response to a referential question from a prime minister). Therefore, we have to move to context-sensitive code-selection in search of a theory A, which would make the prime minister’s emotive-phatic response to a referential question a matter of course. Maybe theory A should move along the lines of the prime minister trying to de-problematize the issues raised in the concrete question by the interviewer, which in turn is related to certain broader issues that keep being de-problematized in the particular society. This might enable us to infer something about democracy and power in this society. And so on. Of course, usually, analysis involves multiple aspects and extensive hopping back and forth between the observations and the theories through which the identity of each is specified and should reach a situation where constitutive inference is warranted even if it cannot be conclusively determined by evidence. The categories and logics presented in the previous chapters in a deductive manner as a discrete cross-table should, in fact, be presented in an abductive manner as a scheme. Figure 7.1 captures this presentation.

In the next chapter, we illustrate these categories as tools for analysis and propose what we call political form analysis and compare this method to various other methods proposed in the social sciences that have affinities with political semiotics.
Fig. 7.1 Abductive presentation of the semiotic categories for constitutive explanation of the political. Note metaphoric or non-discrete pole is also the de-problematization and de-democratization pole; metonymic or discrete pole is also the problematization and democratization pole.

NOTES

1. The analysis in this chapter is partly based on Selg (2019).
2. See for instance Bevir and Rhodes (2015) for a recent mapping of this field and the discussion in the next chapter on relational methods of research.
3. Actor or actorhood, of course, being a social kind too.
4. “Property theories” is a synonym for “constitutive theories” used by Cummins (1983, pp. 14–22), one of the earliest discussants of the distinction between causal and constitutive explanation in psychology.
5. We follow here the most frequently used reference source to the eight-volume Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce (Peirce 1931–1966, Harvard University Press). It is usually referred to by giving the number of the volume and the number of the fragment cited (CP 5.189, for example, is fragment number 189 in volume 5).

REFERENCES


In this chapter, we take a slightly didactic route of presenting our argument: we consider two different examples of analysis that are informed by the political semiotic categories developed in the previous chapters: metonymic and metaphoric axes of language that correspond to problematization and de-problematization of governance or the democratic and totalitarian tendencies within the democratic discourse; and the language functions (phatic, poetic, conative, referential, metalingual and emotive) which are related to different conceptualizations of power. One of the examples contains a detailed, quite technical analysis of a single text that is later put in the wider context of the corresponding political discourse. We could characterize it as a micro-level political semiotic analysis. The second example addresses in a very panoramic fashion a large political phenomenon. After the examples, we take stock from the lessons learned in terms of methods, and put them in the broader context of various interpretive methods in political science and discourse analysis that have affinities with political semiotics, and explain the major differences of our approach. In the next chapter, we outline a more fully developed case study using political semiotics. The aim of this chapter is to put forth what we call political form analysis as a method. Why call it “form analysis”? There are two reasons for such word choice.
8.1 Why Political Form Analysis?

First, an obvious parallel could be brought with a highly utilized term “content analysis.” Political form analysis as proposed here does not rule out its combination with content analysis as it is preached and practiced throughout the social and the health sciences. This is, in fact, related to the general orientation of our approach that we have expressed in several of our recent publications (see especially Selg 2016a, b, 2018): the choice between different methodologies is not an either/or choice in most cases of social research: “These are matters which are influenced by so many additional factors (funding, access to data, time, etc.) besides the normative principles developed by methodologists. In that sense dealing with these matters always involves, to a certain extent, some “muddling through” (Selg 2016b, p. 199). We just want to point out here that “content analysis” is basically a “variable-centered” interactionalist approach to meaning. This is, of course, especially explicit in its quantitative versions. For instance, in a highly influential guide book to the topic, Kimberly Neuendorf defines content analysis—which she also calls “message-centered” approach—as follows:

Content analysis is a summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on scientific method (including attention to objectivity-intersubjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalizability, replicability, and hypothesis testing) and is not limited as to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the message are created or presented. (Neuendorf 2016, p. 10; see also Krippendorf 2004; Weber 1990)

But even in its qualitative version, the approach remains variable-centered, whether it is inductive where coding categories are derived from data, deductive with background categories for coding from theory, or some form of mechanical counting of signifying units (word frequencies) which is accompanied by interpretation of latent content. Political semiotics is about the constitution of messages, not the interaction of contents. Emotive, phatic, poetic, conative, referential and metalingual (generally metonymic/metaphoric tendencies) are aspects of the form of the message, not its content. And it is the form that relates them to different forms of governance, power and democracy. At the same time, as argued throughout the book, the form is processual in character. Thus, the form
systems of description and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to 'elements' or other presumptively detachable or independent 'entities,' 'essences,' or 'realities,' and without isolation of presumptively detachable 'relations' from such detachable 'elements'. (Dewey and Bentley 1949, p. 108).

Therefore, maintaining the important association with “content analysis” we have to bear in mind that the word “form” in “form analysis” refers to “complex joint activity, in which it makes no sense to envision constituent elements apart from the flows within which they are involved (and vice versa)” (Emirbayer 1997, p. 89). In other words, “form” is a process that is not reducible to its instigators (self-actionalism) or reified as an entity (inter-actionalism). This leads to the second more fundamental reason for using the word “form” here.

One of the founders of both sociology and relational sociology more specifically, Georg Simmel is widely known for the statement that sociology should focus its primary attention to the forms of social life rather than their content alone. As the title of one of his major works reads Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms (Simmel 2009 [1908]). “Forms designate for Simmel what is purely social, the social as such,” as Pyyhtinen argues in one of the most recent monographs on Simmel’s legacy (2018, p. 18). The “content” for Simmel is “everything that exists in individuals, the immediate concrete locus of every historical reality—such as impulse, interest, purpose, predisposition, psychological state, and incitement in such a way as to say that on account of them people affect one another and are in turn affected” (Simmel 2009 [1908], p. 23). He points out that

[i]n and of itself this stuff [the “contents”], of which life is full, the motives that drive it, are not quite social. Neither hunger nor love, neither work nor religiosity, neither technology nor the functions and products of intelligence yet mean social interaction in the simple and pure sense given to the term. (ibid.)

Although he specifies that “In every existing social phenomenon, content and social form construct a united reality” (ibid.), the specificity of sociology as a science is its focus on the social forms. As Pyyhtinen explains
in a vocabulary most crucial to us: “Social life cannot in Simmel’s view be grasped in a satisfactory manner by reference to the subjective meanings, aims, intentions, or interests of individuals, as contents merely take place in society without constituting it. Therefore an abstraction of form is called for” (Pyyhtinen 2018, p. 18, italics added). Analogously, when we say that political semiotics is political form analysis, we are not saying that forms exist somehow separately from contents. We are saying that it is the forms that constitute the contents as political in many ways—the metonymic/metaphoric, phatic, emotive, poetic, referential, etc. as the constituent elements of meaning tie them to issues of power, governance and democracy—in other words: the political. Of course, the connection with “public communication” should not be forgotten (see Chapter 3, Sect. 3.5), since not all communication is political. Publicness, as defined also in Chapter 6 (Sect. 6.1), is also a constitutive aspect of political form. To put it in a vernacular way: from the political semiotic point of view one can talk about politics (discussing the daily news, for instance) in a non-political manner; and also the opposite is true: one can talk about non-political issues (from certain perspective at least) in a political manner (like in the discourse of “personal is political”). But even more importantly: one can talk about slavery in a deliberative manner, and also about freedom in a totalitarian fashion since it is not the content that determines the political, but the form of communication. That is why we prefer the term “political form analysis” for the method we propose as it evolves from the relational theory and methodology of political semiotics.

8.2 Micro-Level Political Form Analysis: The Constitution of the Estonian “Bronze-Speak”

Our example comes from an editorial of Postimees (the largest daily newspaper in Estonia) from the New Year’s Eve of 2007 (12.31.2007) entitled “Juhtkiri: Ja aasta sai sõnaks...” [“Editorial: And the year became word...”].

In the following translation, we will highlight the messages contained in the text by providing numbers in square brackets, subscript indicating the beginning and superscript the end of the messages. Some messages contain other messages within their structure, thus forming a hierarchy and mutual dependence. The text as a whole can be seen as a message with a specific relational hierarchy.

[30]The bronze-night made the people converge[30] [31]and cleaned the air.[31] [32]We became aware again of the almost forgotten fact that “they” continue to exist.[32] [33]Hating the state[33] and [34]the people of Estonia[34], [35]they live right here, next to us.[35]

[36]We also became aware that we could cope with our internal crisis ourselves[36] and [37]that in case of foreign threats we have firm supporters and allies[37]. [38]But how could we improve our relations with our largest neighbor without losing integrity is to this day unknown.[38]

In the example, we delineated 38 messages. We start with 3 exemplars of emotive function in which the attitudinal character is the clearest: calling someone’s activity a “rampage” [4] or someone “scoundrels” [5] or “mob of impunibly vandalizing villains” [19]. Next, in the more hidden emotive messages, the attitudinal link is provided through phatic appeals to common places. We call these “emotive-phatic” messages, referring to “direct correlation” (in Hébert’s [2006] sense) between emotive and phatic functions and, using the “intention-based criterion” of Arcand and Bourbeau (1995, cited in Hébert [2006]), we discern the dominance of emotive function in these correlative constructions. The total sum of such messages is 14. Appealing to historical common places
like “Estonia’s shipwreck” [12], “the August putsch” [14], “the coup of June” [26], “the Interfront’s onslaught to Toompea castle” [28] carries an enormous emotional baggage for Estonians, the addressees of this text. We can only briefly summarize the main background: (a) The ship MS Estonia’s sinking in the Baltic Sea on September 28, 1994 claimed 852 lives, over a third of them were Estonians. Considered to be the biggest civil catastrophe of Estonian history it is a commonplace among Estonians that there is not a single Estonian whose relatives, friends, or acquaintances (however remote) were not on that ship. (b) “The August putsch” is a well-known name for an attempt at coup d’etat in Moscow in August 1991 viewed retrospectively to be the concluding event in the collapse of the Soviet Union, but at the time formed a serious threat of moving from the Perestroikian route to a more totalitarian development of the state. (c) The label “coup of June” (“Juunipõöre” in Estonian) is a widely used name signifying the annexation of Estonia by the Soviet Union in June 1940. (d) “Interfront” was a Moscow-orchestrated organization composed in 1989, mostly of ethnic Russians aiming at the preservation of Estonia’s status as a Soviet Republic. In fact, it was on May 15, 1990 (not 1991) when a couple of thousand of the Interfronters held their most violent gathering at Toompea—the location of the residence of the Estonian government.

Besides the 4 appeals to negative historical commonplaces, there are additional 10 emotive-phatic constructions: that it was “of course a complete shock for the people” [17]—the appeal to “of course” in it by an addressee who is in all respects part of “the people” makes this construction a phatic appeal to commonplace rather than referential description. “The bronze-night made the people converge” [30] “and cleaned the air” [31] are both appeals to perceived positively charged commonplaces as are the combined messages [36] and [37]: “We also became aware that we could cope with our internal crisis ourselves and that in case of foreign threats we have firm supporters and allies.” Appeals to commonplaces of fear are represented by messages [32]: “We became aware again of the almost forgotten fact that “they” continue to exist”; [33]: “[“they” are] [h]ating the state”; [34]: “[hating] the people of Estonia”; [35]: “they live right here, next to us”; and finally, by [38]: “But how could we improve our relations with our largest neighbor [i.e. Russia] without losing integrity is to this day unknown.”

In addition to 3 emotive and 14 emotive-phatic constructions, we have 9 messages that could be dubbed “emotive-referential” (analogously to
“emotive-phatic”), that is, references to time, space and facts within the messages with emotive dominant: “a day after the rampage” [3]; “[the word “bronze-night” is] marking a tribulation” [9] “that Estonia has not had to face already over a dozen years” [10]. Estonia’s shipwreck was in 1994 [13]; “[people were] thus far used to observing street-unrests only via foreign television stations” [18]; the August putsch was in 1991 [15]; “the coup of June” was in 1940 [27]; “the Interfront’s onslaught to Toompea castle” was “in the spring of 1991” [29]² And that several events constructed mostly in emotive terms took place “at the same time” [22].

Thus, we could summarize that the emotive axis of the example consists of 26 messages. We turn now to its poetic axis of 2 messages. As already indicated in the previous chapters (see Chapter 6, Sect. 6.2.2), the poetic function is a primary verbal means for creating chains of equivalences between otherwise disparate and discrete units. We see it, first, in message [11] comprising the sequence of messages [12]–[15]. The emotive-phatic ([12], [14]) and emotive-referential messages ([13], [15]) are presented as equivalent to our biggest tribulation in a dozen years pointed to immediately before ([9]–[10]). The poetic equation to build a sequence is present, second, in message [25] making equivalent the messages [26]–[29]: the sequence “this event brought back for many the memory of the coup of June in 1940. Or at least the Interfront’s onslaught to Toompea castle in the spring of 1991” is equated to the same “tribulation” of [9]–[10].

The phatic axis of the example is covered, first, by message [16] that comprises within itself the sequence of messages [17]–[20]. It could be seen in its entirety as a phatic appeal to commonplaces mostly for the sake of contact. Besides the phatic “of course” [17] and “[people were] thus far used to observing street-unrests only via foreign television stations” [18], we have the emotive “mob of impunibly vandalizing villains” [19] and the referential “at the center of their own capital” [20] contained in this message. In our interpretation, the emotive and referential functions in this message are subordinated to the phatic and we could refer to it as phatic-emotive-referential. Second, message [21] comprises the phatic sequence [22]–[25] containing references to time [22] “at the same time,” and facts [23]: “the Russian Duma as well as some local sociologists demanded the resignation of the government”³, [24]: “[the government] had removed the bronze soldier from Tõnismägi” that the addressee (a regular Estonian) is presumed to share and poetic sequence
of equivalence (Jakobson 1960, p. 358) [25] constructed of the emotive elements [26]–[29]: “[T]his event brought back for many the memory of the coup of June in 1940. Or at least the Interfront’s onslaught to Toompea castle in the spring of 1991.” The overall intention of this message is phatic and the other functions (poetic, referential, emotive) serve as secondary or supportive functions (see Arcand and Bourbeau 1995, p. 35, cited in Hébert [2006]). Thus, we have 2 messages with phatic dominant.

Finally, the referential axis of the example: Though most of the referential messages of the example are in a relation of subordination to other messages, some of them are intelligible for the receiver without this subordination and this way could be considered as enhancing the referential axis of the text as a whole. This applies to [20] (“at the center of their own capital”), [23] (“the Russian Duma as well as some local sociologists demanded the resignation of the government”) and [24] (“[the government] had removed the bronze soldier from Tõnismägi”) that we located among the dominantly phatic constructions of [16] and [21]. And this is true for several other references in the text: [1] “‘Bronze-night’—so laconic was the title of the editorial of Postimees”; [2]: “on the 28th of April,” [7]: “Now [i.e. 12.31.2007]”; [6] “at the center of Tallinn”; [8] “this word [‘bronze-night’] has long since embedded into the language use of the people.” Thus, we have 8 messages with referential dominant.

On the whole then, the text example from December 31, 2007 is overwhelmingly an emotive message (26 out of 38), having several poetic (2), phatic (2) and referential (8) messages supporting its dominant intention. We have performed a micro-level semiotic analysis of a single text. Based on it, we can characterize it as overwhelmingly a totalitarian populist text that appeals to direct or general fears of the “enemy” who is constituted through various manifestations (“they,” “impunibly vandalizing [Russian speaking] villains,” members of the Russian Duma, local sociologists). Now, what is the discourse or semiosphere that this text is an element of? As argued by one of us (Selg 2013), this text is part of the so-called Estonian “bronze-night” discourse that revolves around the “empty signifier” (see Chapter 5, Sect. 5.1.5) “bronze-night” as the signifier of the riots and multiple domestic and international events in late April 2007 related to the removal of a World War II memorial (a bronze statue of an unknown soldier) from the center of Tallinn Estonia. One of the immediately palpable consequences of the events has been summarized as follows: when “these two days of civil unrest were over 1 young man had been
killed 100 people including 13 police officers had been injured, and nearly 1000 people had been arrested” (Wertsch 2008, p. 133). The “bronze-night” discourse is overwhelmingly phatic and emotive during the period of roughly 2007–2010. This entails that it is a totalitarian-authoritarian form of governance as de-problematization of the issue. With analogy to Orwellian “duck-speak” (see also Chapter 6, Sect. 6.1.1), Selg uses the notion of “bronze-speak” to characterize the public discourse (mostly in the media) related to the April 2007 events. This is, in essence, a phatic communication that is based on the mythological consciousness in Lotman’s sense (see Chapter 5) where the name and the object named are basically inseparable. The events of April 2007 almost as if literally where made of bronze. One of the curious consequences of it is that there is a proliferation of bronze items in the public discourse under question. The list, based on Estonian newspapers and other media outlets contains, for instance, the following items: bronze-prosecutor, bronze-trial, bronze-night sentence, bronze-sentence, bronze-events, bronze-unrest, bronze-night law, bronze-law, bronze-war, bronze-riot, bronze-strife, bronze-crisis, bronze-packet. This “bronze-speak” is actually nothing else than the coding of discrete events, consequences, actors, locations, etc. into a unified non-discrete sequence where basically certain forms of communication are almost excluded, and everything is ritually tied to the bronze chain of equivalence. What are the political consequences of this? We skip here very many details (see Selg 2013 for a fuller elaboration), but can quote a general conclusion reached regarding this “bronze-speak”:

[W]hat are marginalized in Estonian public discourse concerning the riots of April 26–27, 2007 are the deliberative/referential and radical-democratic/metalingual communication; in turn emotive, phatic and poetic as well as certain forms of conative public communication (associated with totalitarian, authoritarian and democratic populism and clientelism respectively) proliferate. Put very simply: questions like “what happened and what are the implications of it?” (referential) or “should we have done or do something differently?” (metalingual) are made almost unintelligible for the public through reproducing the phatic “bronze-speak” day after day as the primary form of communication concerning the issue. (Selg 2013, p. 97)

In fact, retrospectively we can say that there has not been any deliberative or agonistic debate on the issue thus far on the events under question. At the same time, various researches have shown that the events
had critical negative effects on the cohesion of Estonian society that has a 25% Russian minority. In that sense, we can say that “bronze-speak” was a successful governance strategy of de-problematizing the issue from democratic deliberation.

8.3 Macro-Level Political Form Analysis: European Migrant Crisis and the Constitution of Wickedness

The second example considers a macro-level analysis and is related to the European Migrant Crisis. On August 31, 2015, German Chancellor Angela Merkel uttered the words: “Wir haben so vieles geschafft – wir schaffen das,” which could be translated roughly as “We have managed so many things – we can manage this too.” Given that the words we spoken after the chancellor’s visit to a German refugee camp near Dresden where she was met with hostile reactions by anti-refugee activists we could say that at this very communicative context Merkel’s words constituted a metalingual communication: it addressed the rising sentiment of being unable to manage the flow of migrants and refugees from the third world countries and it was also questioning the increasingly influential anti-immigration movement. However, the initially metalingual communication ended up being an emotive commonplace. The reason for that could partly be seen in that taken out of context, the second part of Merkel’s statement—“wir schaffen das”—could also be translated as just “we can do it.” This part of her utterance became a slogan (essentially emotive/phatic form of communication). It became a slogan for those positively minded about the welcoming of refugees from East Asia and Africa—resonated by Merkel herself by repeating it—as well as for those who vehemently opposed it—the latter using it in an ironic or disdainful sense. Consequently, a year later, in September 2016, Merkel reflecting in an interview to a financial newspaper Wirtschaftswoche said: “I sometimes think this phrase was a little overstated, that too much store was set by it — to the extent that I’d prefer not to repeat it,” and adding: “It’s become a simple slogan, an almost meaningless formula” (quoted in Livingstone 2016). “Wir schaffen das” was said in the latter part of 2015, a year when we saw movement upwards of 28 million people displaced due to conflict, violence, and disaster, joining the 244 million international migrants already moving throughout the globe (Kaundert and
Masys 2018, p. 73). According to the UNHCR Annual Global Trends Report, World at War, this is the “highest level ever recorded” (2015b). Within this international development, the EU (and its historic territory) is facing the largest and most complex surge in migration since the Second World War. Between January 2015 and February 2016 alone more than 1.1 million people fled from conflict and poverty and landed in the EU (Kaundert and Masys 2018, p. 73). The UNHCR (2015a) estimated that over one million people had reached Europe via the Mediterranean and over 3700 of them went missing alone in 2015. During 2015, the major referent object regarding the European Migrant Crisis among top politicians in the EU was that the crisis is first and foremost about an issue of an overflow of migrants to Europe and the humanitarian crisis related to that. Conceptualizing the crisis as a humanitarian crisis meant referential-deliberative communication—“sticking to the point,” talking of facts and figures and organizing means for dealing with concrete people and their problems. There is, however, a catch in this conceptualization.

Already more than 3 years ago, it was conceptualized as a “‘wicked problem’—one characterized by: (1) multiple, potentially conflicting values, (2) strong political passions on different sides of the issue, (3) substantive uncertainty on how best to solve the problem, and (4) multiple independent arenas for social deliberation and action” (Geuijen et al. 2017, p. 622). The quoted publication, in a leading academic journal Public Management Review, which was made available online already in 2016, is telling in many ways. Given the time academic publishing takes (with its rounds of reviews and lingering editorial decisions and production), it can be presumed to be composed roughly around 2015, the year of “Wir schaffen das” and the roughly a million incoming refugees and thousands of drownings in the Mediterranean. According to the authors, the “wickedness” of the European Migrant Crisis is related to the multiplicity of interdependent and mutually constitutive crises, conflicts and threats both at the local and global level.

In the following, we want to demonstrate the usefulness of political semiotic explanation when analyzing this wickedness of the crisis. We start with the actions taken by Germany during the European Migrant Crisis. Our focus at this moment will be put on the apparent shift in governance to address the crisis in 2015–2016. In terms of our proposed methodology, we should say that the dominant form of communication has been replaced with another one. Even though our aim here is not to conduct a fully developed empirical study, but to illustrate our method. We use
the Jakobsonian categories outlined in Chapter 6 and the methodological proposals set forth in Chapter 7 to understand the initial discourse and considering the role of communication to understand the workings of the superseding one.

Initially, we can track an overarching metalingual discourse that leads to the initial offer of support to arriving refugees (see Lichtenstein et al. 2017, p. 108). It is metalingual in the sense of appealing to empathy—ability to perceive the contingency of social positions, including one’s own. From the semiotic point of view, it is appealing to the contingency of the code that defines “us” and “them” as being in a “natural,” “fixed” position. This relates the initial discourse to the ideas of radical democracy and self-reflective metagovernance. At the center of radical democracy, as we argued in Chapter 3 (Sect. 3.4) lies “the ethos of contingency” (see also Selg 2012). And in Chapter 6, we explicitly tied the idea of radical democracy to the prevalence of metalingual public communication (Sect. 6.1.5). In 2015, the support to help the refugees had also been expressed by the media, the government and even the opposition in Germany. Merkel’s viral “Wir schaffen das” can among other things be seen as a direct response to the humanitarian tragedy that was likely to occur in Hungary in case no actions are taken by Germany (Trauner and Turton 2017, p. 35). Why such a metalingual discourse? Under what conditions would this be a matter of course? The constitution of such a discourse can be traced down to the so-called Willkommenskultur (welcoming culture) which finds its historical roots in the events in and after the Second World War, such as Germany’s collective memory of the crimes performed in the War, and the fact that many Germans were refugees themselves after the war had ended (Holmes and Castañeda 2016, pp. 14–16)—pointing again to the contingency of social positions. It is worth noting that also the global refugee regime is based on a discourse that puts humanitarianism and emphatic motives at its focus and derived from the same starting point in an attempt to make sure that the cruelties of the Second World War cannot be repeated. This discourse has been the dominant one in much of the Western World and extended its reach by the West’s quests for Human Rights and basic liberties. In Germany, specifically, we can find some more historical junctures that did strengthen the discourse and increased its durability. The cruelties of the Second World War have been mostly concealed in the direct aftermath of the War and have been only introduced into the public discourse once the following generation asked the question of collective guilt of the
German people. This public debate erupted anew in the mid-1980s when a sense of collective memory, centering around the holocaust, started to affect political outcomes in the German Federal Republic and has been for instance used as an argument for expanding the EU eastwards (Langenbacher 2003, pp. 46–47). A debate of the historians (Historikerstreit) about the Nazi regime was held for years in the leading German news outlets and actively followed by many Germans. The continuous recapturing of the attention and recall of the past kept the discourse in its dominant position and in a way, buttressed the welcoming culture. Up until this day, it is part of Germany’s identity to carry the guilt and the responsibilities (remembering and preventing) deriving from it. Additionally, migration waves of the last 50 years emanating from Southern Europe but also the Muslim World (Caglar and Soysal 2003) created a multi-ethnic society that has sensitized the population to accept the arrival of people with different cultural backgrounds.

We could even uncover a referential-deliberative ground of this welcoming culture. It is argued that an increase in immigration is economically beneficent. Even though the hosting of refugees is connected with high short-term costs, its long-term benefits for the entire system are undeniable (Gottwald 2014, p. 528). Once the initial phase is overcome, host countries will notice a positive contribution to the productivity of the national economy (especially considering Europe’s demographic problem). In Germany, a link between refugee reception and its strong economic performance in 2016 has been identified (Hansen 2017, p. 132). On the other hand, source countries will benefit from the return movements of people with more skills and more extensive networks (Gottwald 2014, p. 528) which will lead to more stability in the region and the global economic system. In fact, protecting refugees and preventing and resolving conflict should be considered an international public good that benefits the entire world (ibid., p. 530) according to this discourse. Even the realist rationality driven by self-interest should put a significant focus on the prevention and resolution of conflicts and the protection of refugees (ibid., p. 531). This can be best achieved, it is argued if the burden of the refugee regime is indeed shared and the countries of the Global North take not only on their responsibility but actively ease the burden of the South by using their capabilities to benefit the overall system.

Thus, the metalingual welcoming culture with certain referential-deliberative grounding could lie behind the initial open-door governance
of migrants. However, this also plays a crucial role in the constitution of “wickedness” of the problems to come. By autumn 2016, the open border had been suspended and completely turned around. Germany, like many of its neighboring countries, shut down the unconstrained flow of migrants and installed border controls to control the flow. It appears that the metalingual discourse has lost its dominant position and taken a back seat. A discourse that considers refugees and migration a security issue has taken hold. As we pointed out in the 6th chapter, securitization is a dominantly emotive discourse, which entails certain hierarchical action (conative communication). Security discourse emerged in the post-Cold War world, which saw a change in the security paradigm from simple military threats to a broad definition of threats to human security (Paris 2001). In this new paradigm, refugees were seen as a potential threat to international and domestic stability, and therefore, states grew reluctant to host them. This led to the eventual state in which the Global North viewed asylum as a problem of South from which most refugees emanated (Betts 2011). The discourse was already active in the 1990s when the dissolution of Yugoslavia created masses of refugees to EU countries and the paths to asylum have been narrowed (Suhrke 1998, p. 406). However, at least in Germany, it went in and out of the dominant position. This frame is very attractive for political use since avoiding the short-term costs of hosting asylum-seekers by making them stay in the region was easily politicized. With this, the discourse focused on the economic, social, and terrorist threats that could originate from asylum-seekers, not on their human needs. Most parts of the Western World swiftly felt comfortable in this new discourse, adopted this way of thinking and viewed the flow of migrants immediately as a threat. This was not directly the case in Germany where, due to the strong presence of the metalingual discourse for several generations, the crisis was viewed dominantly as a humanitarian and not a political one. Politicizing the humanitarian issue through emotive discourse of security was noticeable in other European countries. These countries have seen the awakening and rise of mostly right-wing populist parties or rhetoric after the recession of 2010 and the resulting austerity politics (Taggart 2017, p. 256). Later populists would also willingly connect migration with questions of security. Germany had proven to be somewhat immune to the populist movement by stigmatizing every new right-wing party as heirs of National Socialism. This turned with the events around the Cologne Central Station at New Year’s Eve 2015–2016 and the growing number of terrorist attacks in Europe like in Nice,
Reutlingen, and Berlin—that were partly committed by individuals getting into Europe seeking for protection (Trauner and Turton 2017, p. 39)—which has captured the attention of the Germans. This gave the AfD (Alternative for Germany)—Germany’s right-wing populist party—and the PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident) protest movement new breeding ground which they used to penetrate the public discourse with their ideas on migration. The receptivity of the German people to this type of emotive discourse derives from the electoral success similar parties had in other Western European countries—most notably Austria, France, and the UK—which molded it into an acceptable opinion to have. Given these developments, the emotive discourse was eventually picked up and propagated by the German mainstream parties (ibid., p. 40). The change in the public discourse, together with the attention that the terror attacks demand, sedimented the new emotive security discourse.

We have seen the shift in Germany from metalingual self-reflexive metagovernance to a form of emotive de-problematization of the humanitarian crisis: in essence, there is a movement from empathy-based perception of the contingency of social positions of “us” and “them” to an antagonistic fear-based emotive discourse that constitutes “them” as a “natural” enemy. But what makes the European Migrant Crisis a wicked problem from the political semiotic point of view? A simple answer would be miscommunication. It is the miscommunication between problematization and de-problematicization, democratic, and authoritarian discourses—or in most general terms: between metonymic and metaphoric coding. Miscommunication from the political semiotic point of view is none other than extreme untranslatability between coding systems. The latter are non-other than political forms. It is crucial to stress that again: the conflict is not so much about the contents of the issue—which would be central if conflicting parties would have a metalingual-referential or, more generally, metonymic form of communication. It is exactly the untranslatability of political forms that constitutes the wickedness of the issue: the untranslatability of metonymic and metaphoric discourses. We can only touch very general contours of this constitution of wickedness here.

Wicked problems are often symptoms of other problems and attempted solutions can never be right or wrong but only good or bad (Rittel and Webber 1973; Peters 2017). On top of that, solution attempts will have consequences that may not be reversible. We can see all those aspects here.
Various attempts at solution created other crises: *metalingual-democratic* “wir schaffen das” became essentially *emotive-totalitarian* “wir schaffen das,” for instance. These might have an even more drastic impact on the European population and the decision-makers themselves. In other words, “[m]any wicked problems seem to lurch from crisis to crisis” (Head 2019, p. 189). To show this, we will point out the different crises of which the European Migrant Crisis is comprised of and how they constitute each other. In more detail, we will look at the *humanitarian*, the *political/legitimacy* and the *geopolitical* crisis which interdependently ground the *un-owned* process (see Chapter 2, Sect. 2.2.4) that we call European Migrant Crisis.

**Humanitarian Crisis.** The humanitarian issues lay within a complex system which makes successful intervention especially problematic. In fact, approaching a problem in such a complex system with “a linear mindset can lead to interventions that result in unintended consequences” (Kaundert and Masys 2018, p. 81) and “the failure to understand or (…) acknowledge the nonlinear and highly complex nature of global linkages on every level of governance leads to growing weakness and can paralyze decision-making” (Goldin and Mariathasan 2014, p. 3). In a sense, the initial *metalingual* addressing of the very crisis as “merely” a humanitarian crisis can be considered a source of this paralysis of decision-making constituting among other things the political crisis the EU and many of the national governments of its member states face, and mostly in the form of *emotive* discourse of right-wing populism.

**Political Crisis.** Analytically, we can discern two mutually constitutive processes of the political crisis in the EU. One of them is a *crisis of democracy* as a result of which we can trace a demise of general democratic tendencies in Europe, allowing for anti-democratic and anti-establishment parties to gain confidence. The other part must be considered a *legitimacy crisis* which is leading to growing mistrust in the EU institutions, the idea of the EU itself or even the nation-state. This got expressed by voters in national and European elections in which anti-establishment and anti-EU parties recorded great results, but also by national governments and politicians who actively seek more (economic) freedom and independence for their states, with Brexit being the most significant example. When the Commission’s majority decisions to relocate 120,000 refugees in 2015 was objected and ignored by Poland, Hungary, and Czech Republic (European Commission 2017) it indicates for many a clear lack of resonance of the EU’s values (Murray and Longo 2018, p. 575). Murray and
Longo conclude that this “rebellion by member states (…) is unprecedented in its breadth and depth, given that it constitutes not only contestation but direct opposition to the EU’s authority and legal framework” (ibid.). There seems to be a mistrust by national governments that EU-wide solutions can govern the problem. Nicola Phillips goes even a step further and states that the “migration crisis represents one of the most notable and consequential episodes of political failure in the history of European cooperation, which, many worry, retains the capacity to challenge the core of the European project” (2018, p. 62).

The legitimacy crisis of the EU is born out of the latter’s responses toward the humanitarian crisis, which has “witnessed contestation by the government of states, by opposition parties and by citizens” (Murray and Longo 2018, p. 571). At its ground, the issues relate to the governing of the humanitarian crisis and the differences in practices that various actors are promoting (ibid.). Here, we can start to see the constitutive relations among the crises. The political crisis is beginning to be inextricably linked with the humanitarian crisis, being part of its very identity. The intense politicization through emotive de-problematization of the (initially) referential—or even technical—issue of handling the flows of refugees and other migrants—makes it an issue that cannot be contained safely in the sphere of expert knowledge any more: it has become a “people’s” issue, that mostly but not exclusively have been put on the table by right-wing populist parties all over Europe. Therefore, it makes little sense to claim that the Migrant Crisis is over, even though the flows of migrants at the borders of the EU are (relatively) under control. It has become a wicked problem that is constantly fluctuating between different crises, political being one of them. Responses to one crisis—especially attempts to “solve” it in isolation—will inevitably affect the others, since, in case of constitutive relations, the crises are interdependent and cannot be considered as being separate from one another. One literally cannot comprehend or even access the referential handling requiring humanitarian crisis without the lens of the emotive discourses around threats to nation-states and European national cultures, terrorism, etc. that the populist parties and politicians resonate throughout Europe. Not only does the humanitarian crisis—and more generally the flows of migrants in Europe—constitute a political crisis, but the opposite is true as well: the political crisis frames how it is conceivable to handle the humanitarian crisis. Further, it is unlikely that large migration waves will stop in the future as living-conditions in many parts of the world will get worse and
migration is for many the answer to this (Castelli 2018). The political crisis is not only a result of the humanitarian crisis. They are intrinsically intertwined. They cannot be seen independent from each other, but as mutually constituting each other. Approaches to govern one of them will have to take into account the consequences of governing another. However, from the semiotic point of view, this would entail reconciling highly metonymic (metalingual, referential) discourse with highly metaphoric (emotive) discourse. Such a situation of extreme untranslatability is a major part of the “wickedness” of the problem. And this has ramifications to the geopolitical level as well.

**Geopolitical Crisis.** The geopolitical crisis gets fueled by the lack of unity among European countries, but its earliest realization started in 2008 with Russia re-claiming their physical influence on the continent via the Georgian-Russian war and later with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Wivel and Wæver 2018, p. 318). This new security environment also upset the geo-economic constellations the EU and its Eastern neighbors were a part of (Youngs 2017). The geopolitical power of the EU is expressed in its unity, and it has clearly suffered during the last five years. The dissonance between political camps in most European states has led to unstable societies throughout the continent. This situation is clearly favored by the Russian Federation that feasts on the instability of its competition. Evidence for this type of “Hybrid Warfare”—a subtler approach than plain military one to gain political objectives and retain a certain degree of “plausible deniability”—have been identified in the Crimean Crisis (Lanoszka 2016), and it must be assumed that these methods were executed in other contexts. The tactics include the use of propaganda to initiate insurgencies and divide societies. Germany offers an ideal playing field for the Kremlin’s tactics that have already worked during the previous German election (Aaltola 2017) and increased the divide between right and left. This divide is reached through the manipulation of the political discourse that decides on the blame for the situation (political-economic structures, the displaced persons themselves), demarcates the “deserving” migrant from the “undeserving” refugee and generally activates the fear of cultural, religious, and ethnic differences (Holmes and Castañeda 2016, p. 12). 5

Taking this brief outline of the constitution of the wickedness of the European Migrant Crisis toward some conclusions, we should quote at length the paper we already quoted above. According to the authors, the European Migrant Crisis is
a problem that could be seen simultaneously as: a humanitarian crisis based in the suffering of individuals who had abandoned their homes; a geopolitical conflict ranging across countries and continents; a security threat for both receiving and transit countries; a potentially heavy financial burden on already overtaxed states; and the breakdown of collaboration in the network of EU member states. Furthermore, the problem would not be addressed in a single political forum where all those with stakes and capacities could together devise a solution, then rely on their common assets to deal with the issue effectively and fairly. The response, instead, would emerge from a disjointed discourse spanning many different polities, government jurisdictions, and even private organizations, who exercised only to lose control over the assets that could help solve the problem. (Geuijen et al. 2017, p. 622, italics added)

It seems that the elements of the crisis are in a certain chronological sequence which would indicate that a linear causal analysis would be suitable for its explanation. Nevertheless, currently (2020), when the flows of migrants at the border of Europe are under control compared to 2015, it is questionable to declare the crisis to be over, which it would be if the crisis were constituted through referential-deliberative communication alone. It has given rise to various other crises in Europe and the European Union: the political crisis of anti-democratic offensive from right-wing populist parties throughout Europe whose major upsurge is related to anti-refugee sentiments fueled by the (un)governance of the humanitarian crisis. This in turn sets aflame the geopolitical crisis—the anti-EU sentiments, the questioning of the viability of the Schengen Agreement, the increasing ability of Russia to intervene in European politics and so on. All those crises are interdependent and therefore mutually constitutive. Thus, for instance, the (un)governance of the humanitarian crisis ignites the political crisis and is used as a fuel for the meddling campaigns in the geopolitical crisis. The political crisis leads to un-governance (de-problematization) of the humanitarian crisis refueling, in turn, the political crisis and it also provides the breeding ground for the geopolitical crisis. The same applies to the geopolitical crisis that stirs up the anti-refugee sentiment and affects the humanitarian and political crises by doing so. Additionally, the sheer existence of Russian influence on the continent intensifies the political crisis (see Alisic and Letschert 2016; Geuijen et al. 2017; Taylor and Masys 2018; Murray and Longo 2018; Streek 2017). All the crises and conflicts are in a constitutive relationship and it is not possible to view them as independent entities. They can be
viewed “separately, but not as being separate” from both the viewpoint of research and governance. Schematically, we can depict the wickedness of the European Migrant Crisis as in Fig. 8.1.

Of course, as with static figures on the pages of books, the processual and continuously changing configurations of elements through which the meaning of elements themselves are constituted and reconstituted is somewhat lost. But if we are to conceptualize the crisis as a wicked problem, then we have to imagine this scheme in a moving diachronic fashion rather than only as a synchronic snapshot.

8.4 Implications of Political Form Analysis

What we have done in these brief examples of micro-level and macro-level political form analysis could be called—referring to Chapter 7—context-sensitive code-selection to explain though abductive inference under what conditions would certain surprising observations be “a matter of course.” Basically, we have asked a research question throughout our examples: “What is the code/context C that would make the X (a surprising fact) count as Y (a matter of course)” to mix the vocabulary of Searle’s notion
of constitutive rules and Peirce’s formula for abduction, which were both discussed in the previous chapter on methodology. This way, we have provided an initial constitutive explanation of the de-problematization strategy of the Estonian “bronze-speak” and the untranslatability of highly metonymic and highly metaphoric discourses that constitute the wickedness of the European Migrant Crisis. These explanations purport not to be conclusive, of course, and manifold additional research strategies and techniques could be employed for providing a fuller explanation of the phenomena analyzed in the examples. We try to illustrate in the next chapter a more systematic analysis of the constitution of political phenomena. In this chapter, however, we want to bring to the prominence a final aspect of the constitutive explanation through the process of abductive reasoning: namely its narrative form. We argue that inferring the C (the code/context), which would make X (a surprising fact) count as Y (a matter of course) is essentially processual and narrative in its form.

That explanation of social action, which is constituted through practices of meaning-making takes a narrative form, is quite widely discussed in various interpretive traditions in political/policy science and critical discourse analysis (see Bevir and Rhodes 2015; Wagenaar 2011; Wodak and Meyer 2009). For instance, Bevir and Blakely characterize explanations as a form of “engaging in the hermeneutic circle, and explaining a particular pattern through the construction of a holistic narrative of meanings, not formulating mechanistic laws. Agents should be situated within traditions, and stories told about how they inherited or modified their beliefs, actions, and practices” (2018, p. 99). What is important here is that not the specific methods of data collection or data analysis, but a certain theoretical-methodological orientation is what entails a narrative form of explanation:

This analysis does not prescribe a particular methodological toolkit for generating data. Instead, it prescribes a particular way of treating data of any type. An interpretive approach suggests that political scientists should treat data in ways consistent with the philosophical analysis of the task of interpreting interpretations. Proponents of an interpretive approach argue political scientists should treat data as evidence of the meanings or beliefs embedded in actions. Political scientists should not try to bypass meanings or beliefs by reducing them to given principles of rationality, fixed norms or social categories. (Bevir and Rhodes 2006, p. 22)
Thus, neither quantitative nor qualitative techniques determine whether we have a narrative explanation. For instance, mass surveys—one of the important data collection methods used for quantitative analyses—can be accommodated with the narrative type of explanation: “the descriptions of mass survey research and structured interviews can be accepted as valid while also insisting that explanation requires embedding these beliefs within some narrative” (Bevir and Blakely 2018, p. 99).

Similarly, arguing for the “argumentative turn” in policy analysis Fischer and Gottweis point to the constitutive nature of narratives in meaning-making: “Fundamentally, narrative story-telling reveals or conveys an experience structured as a sequence of events or occurrences (e.g., a beginning, middle, and ending) through which individuals relate their experiences to one another” (2012, pp. 12–13). Even when analyzing arguments, one cannot ignore stories:

The specific role of the story is to furnish communication with particular details that provide the material out of which social meaning is created. They are not arguments as such, but arguments are often included as part of the story. Arguments can also be based on a story or drawn from them. They often are the source of the propositions of arguments and frequently provide evidence for claims. (ibid., p. 13)

Basically, what we have done with our context-sensitive code-selection is constructing a story of the code/context C in which a surprising fact X counts as Y or “a matter of course.” The background for this is in essence, similar to interpretive political science as articulated most clearly by Bevir and Rhodes:

when proponents of an interpretive approach suggest that meanings or beliefs are inherently holistic, they suggest we can explain meanings or beliefs by locating them as part of the web of those other meanings or beliefs that give them their character. To locate beliefs in webs of beliefs, and to locate webs of beliefs against the background of traditions and dilemmas, is to explain those beliefs and the actions and practices they inspire. (2006, p. 20)

At the philosophical core of interpretive social science in general (see Bevir and Rhodes 2015 [eds.] and Bevir and Blakely 2018) is that social science
interprets interpretations and from this comes naturally that interpretations, explanations, and narratives are inextricably intertwined at every level of political analysis:

Narratives are the way we explain actions and practices. They play a dual role in interpretive studies. First, when we offer an interpretation of governance, we offer a narrative. Second, the actors in our narrative have their own interpretations of their actions and practices, and these accounts also include narrative explanations. We deliberately use narrative to describe both what we offer and what we study. To say that we offer narratives of narratives restates the philosophical analysis of political science as interpretations of interpretations. (Bevir and Rhodes 2006, p. 20)

Thus, one of the features, political semiotics, as argued in this book, shares with the interpretive approach to governance and policy is that it too puts forth a certain narrative analysis. At the same time, the method of form analysis as put forth in this chapter relates the form of meanings to forms of democracy, governance, and power, which also provides opportunities, but does not necessitate a critical analysis based on narrative explanations. For instance, the conclusions from the example of “bronze-speak” clearly could be seen not only as explanatory but also a normative statement. This normativity partly relates political semiotics to a large body of work known as critical discourse analysis or CDA. But it also has differences from that tradition.

For instance, great representatives of CDA, Fairclough and Fairclough (2015) consider their approach both analytical as well as normative (prescriptive). The normative dimension emerges in various forms of criticisms that can be leveled against certain arguments—and argumentative nature is one of the core characteristics of political texts according to them (ibid., p. 189). First, one can criticize the conclusion of the argument under scrutiny; second the “validity of the argument”; and, third, the “rational acceptability (or truth) of premises” (ibid., p. 192). Similarly, what one of the founders of CDA sees as the specificity of critical approach as such is the following:

Beyond description or superficial application, critical science in each domain asks further questions, such as those of responsibility, interests, and ideology. Instead of focusing on purely academic or theoretical problems, it starts from prevailing social problems, and thereby chooses the perspective of those who suffer most, and critically analyses those in power, those
One of the features of political semiotics is that while it is normative, it can be critical in the sense of CDA, but it does not have to be: explaining the success of forms of governance, democracy and exercise of power can equally be part of political form analysis, as can be their failure or the “wickedness” of the political. The core endeavor of political semiotics is explanation in the form of what makes a surprising fact or (set of facts) (X) a matter of course (Y). It could be that the “what” (the C) in question is something utterly worth of condemn, but it must not be so. This is one meaningful way that our approach differs from CDA, even though it shares its normative orientation. The other important way it differs from CDA is that its method is directly related to meta-theory (relationalism, Chapters 2, 3, and 4), theory (semiotic theory of the political, Chapters 5 and 6), and methodology (constitutive explanation and abductive reasoning, Chapter 7), while in the CDA these links are often constructed in an ad hoc basis. The links between the form of communication, governance, power, and democracy on the one hand and the mode of research on the other have been theorized based on approaches in semiotics and linguistics and political science. Usually, the second part is missing in CDA and it is added—if at all—in an ad hoc manner in concrete problem-driven research in the last phase of the linguistically oriented textual analysis (including audio-visual and other non-verbal texts). For instance, take the notion of power as it is present in two eminent representatives of CDA and social semiotics. Power is everywhere in van Leeuwen’s writings. It is associated with rules (2005, p. 48), ideology (ibid., p. 38) and personal and impersonal authority (ibid., pp. 40, 53–55, 282), institutions (ibid., p. 98); statuses (2008, p. 81); genres (ibid., p. 128) and Foucauldian “microphysics of power” (ibid., pp. 128, 131, 136–137); forms of address (ibid., p. 164), metaphors (ibid., pp. 200, 204) or even space (ibid., p. 90) and time (ibid., p. 76) and even viewer’s perspective in visual communications (ibid., p. 139; see also p. 141). On the other hand, in van Leeuwen (2005, 2008) the keyword “power” is not even present in the index. Same holds for “hegemony” (though we have “legitimation” [2005, p. 280; see also 2008, pp. 20, 105–123; 2007]). We have power in the index of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and in Hodge and Kress (1999), but nowhere do we find any attempt to theorize power and relate it to the perspectives...
on it found in political analysis. Similar tendencies can characterize most of the works within the tradition of CDA that has organically grown out from linguistics rather than political science (see Wodak and Meyer 2009 for an overview of major approaches within the tradition). And political semiotics is exactly an attempt at providing a research method of political form analysis that is based on political theory, political methodology, and general reflections on the underlying relational approaches to the political (which could be called political ontology—see Hay 2006).

We turn now to a more extensive illustration of the method of political form analysis by applying it to a case most relevant in the contemporary setting: the constitution of e-threats.

NOTES

1. See Hsieh and Shannon (2005) for most-cited comparison of the three major research strategies in qualitative content analysis.
2. The example is based on Selg (2013).
3. The minimal intertextual chain (Fairclough 1993, pp. 130–133) for this message is composed of two links: (a) the paper published on April 30, 2007, by a sociologist Juhan Kivirähk in EPL concluding with a demand for the resignation of Prime Minister; (b) the widely covered statement by the leader of the delegation of the Russian State Duma (visiting Estonia on April 30, 2007) that Estonian government should step down.
4. The example is partly based on Klasche and Selg (2020).
5. The role and threat of terrorism also fall in this category. A stability defying force also emanates from radical Muslim terrorist attacks that are now being linked with migration flows has a similar destabilizing impact on Europe.

REFERENCES


CHAPTER 9

Application of Relational Political Analysis:
Political Semiotic Explanation
of the Constitution of Digital Threats

9.1 Introduction

The example concentrates on the media coverage of the theoretical vulnerability in Estonian identity cards discovered in autumn 2017.¹ This coverage painted the so far overwhelmingly positive image of Estonian e-state into much darker colors and began envisioning several imminent e-threats. Ever since the beginning of the 1990s, talk of smart e-solutions in education, medicine, and state government has become commonplace; many researchers have pointed out that the digital success story has been constituted as a cornerstone of the Estonian national brand (Jansen 2008, 2012; Kulcsár and Yum 2012, p. 198; Madisson 2017; Tammpuu and Masso 2018). In collaboration with marketing agencies, dozens of top politicians and experts—or in other words, the spokespersons of e-Estonia—have been systematically spreading and creating messages that promote Estonia’s image as a digital state, both for domestic and foreign audiences.² This image of Estonia was perhaps one of the main reasons for the emergence of a heated public debate around the unsuccessful communication strategies deployed to inform the public about the identity card vulnerability. A common position taken was that the coverage of the vulnerability had created an irrational panic that, on the one hand, undermines citizens’ positive outlook on the e-state and, on the
other, enables hostile forces to keep detailed track of the vulnerabilities of Estonia’s digital infrastructure—and consequently, to undermine the Estonian state’s security and/or positive image (see also Ventsel and Madisson 2019). Such a discourse surrounding the identity card vulnerability provides political semiotics with fascinating research material since we have here the collision between positive self-descriptions and expressions of several fears related to the digital state that constitute the problem articulation.

Many authors have shown that the main characteristics of the cyber threat discourse include understandings of cyberspace as ambiguous and poorly grasped: it is perceived as ungovernable, unknowable, vulnerable, inevitably threatening, and inhabited by a range of intimidating and hostile actors (Barnard-Wills and Ashenden 2012; Madisson 2017, Jarvis and Macdonald 2014). This, in turn, permits an atmosphere to develop in which mythological thinking and fear thrive (Mavropalias 2011). It means, the object-level complexity and vague boundaries of information and communications technology (ICT) tend to get transferred to meta-level analyses (e.g., to expert opinions). The latter, then, consider a general culture of fear accompanying the developments of information technology, without, however, explicating the culture’s specific elements and their interrelations (Sandywell 2006; Hansen and Nissenbaum 2009; Jarvis et al. 2016).

This does not mean that these threats are entirely ungrounded, but in contemporary society threats are not usually understood to be the result of a single factor (e.g., attacking e-systems) and they are often influenced by technological developments (Giddens 1990; Beck 1999; Cronin 2003; Lia 2005; Cavelty 2008). It is in such a context that a concrete e-threat is articulated and accepted as an existential threat \textit{qua} discursive act (Barnard-Wills and Ashenden 2012, p. 114). That is why e-threats and e-risks are constituted as “wicked problems.” Their “wickedness” is not so much a characteristic or attribute of certain problems as such but is \textit{constituted} by ideas and perceptions of the relevant stakeholders in a specific context (Grint 2010; Head and Alford 2015), entailing that “solving” a problem (e.g., cyber terror) might exacerbate the situation by creating new and even more serious problems in other spheres (e.g., human rights).

Besides political semiotics, the analysis uses the framework of securitization developed by the Copenhagen school of international relations. The scholars of this school underline the social aspects of security.
According to the framework of securitization, constructing an e-threat is a discursive act that constitutes at least one referent object, envisioned as being under threat and thus in need of urgent protection (Hansen and Nissenbaum 2009, p. 1156; Barnard-Wills and Ashenden 2012, p. 114). The referent object can be a state or a nation, but it can also belong to the private sector, for example, banking or transport. In studying securitization, it is important to analyze when does a discourse with a specific semiotic structure attain enough power to persuade the public in breaking the rules in a way previously unacceptable (Buzan et al. 1998, p. 25). Hansen and Nissenbaum (2009, p. 1157) name three discursive strategies of securitization: (1) everyday security practices that draw on everyday experiences and securitize the latter through constructing possible scenarios; (2) technification: the discourse of threat and possible solutions to problems are constituted as necessitating technical expert knowledge; and (3) hyper-securitization, the construction of large-scale instantaneous cascading disaster scenarios that place a long list of grave threats into an immense chain—while none of those threat scenarios have yet taken place.

In our analysis, we focus, first, on how through the discovered security risks in the ID-cards the discourse of e-threats was constituted. Our aim is to show which communicative forms (emotive, phatic, conative, metalinguial, referential, poetic) prevailed in the rhetoric of different speakers in the shaping of security risks related problems. Secondly, we articulate the general semiotic mechanisms underlying the discourses of e-threats that constitute the logic of governing this problem.

We analyzed 40 articles published on Estonian news sites (Postimees.ee, Delfi.ee, ERR.ee, Geenius.ee) from September 2017 to September 2018. All the analyzed articles referred explicitly to the identity card vulnerability. Postimees.ee and Delfi.ee are the most viewed news sites in Estonia; ERR.ee is the official site of Estonian Public Broadcasting. Geenius.ee was included in the sample because the site concentrates largely on digital and electronic technology; furthermore, the articles published in Geenius.ee are often reported in major Estonian newspapers.
9.2  THE CONSTITUTION OF e-THREATS IN THE REPRESENTATION OF THE MEDIA COVERAGE OF ESTONIAN IDENTITY CARD VULNERABILITY

9.2.1 Chronology of the Case

At the beginning of September 2017, the Estonian public was notified that the almost 760,000 identity cards of the new type (i.e., issued from October 2014 until October 2017), produced by Gemalto, have been identified as having a theoretical vulnerability in their software. On November 3, CERT-EE, an institution operating under the Information System Authority (Riigi Infosüsteemi Amet, RIA), issued a warning of potential phishing e-mails. Such e-mails were associated with the potential spreading of malware and identity theft. From the evening of November 3, the Estonian government decided to suspend all certificates of identity cards with the vulnerability. The Police and Border Guard Board (Politseija Piirivalveamet, PPA) offices were open, from November 3 to November 5, outside working hours in order to provide intensive users—those who actively use the PIN1 and PIN2 codes—with the possibility to update their certificates. During these three days, remote updating of certificates was disabled. Priority was given to doctors, legal workers, and employees of the Vital Statistics Department (Jõevere and Helme 2017). After November 5, remote updating of certificates was restored until March 31, 2018. It transpired, however, that 18,000 people could not update their certificates remotely (Krjukov 2017). Extensive media coverage of the identity card vulnerability ensured numerous turnout to the PPA offices of even those people who used identity cards’ electronic applications infrequently (Saar 2017). The end of November 2017 witnessed a marked media escalation of the topic. At that time, a dispute broke out between Gemalto and the PPA. Gemalto’s representatives claimed that they had notified the PPA of the vulnerability already in the summer and that the latter had simply covered it up until September (Pau 2017a).

9.2.2 Mapping Referent Objects: National Security, Private Sector, and e-Estonia’s Reputation

In the analysis of the threat discourses regarding the identity card vulnerability, we were able to delineate three principal domains of referent objects represented as directly threatened. The first domain was related to
national security—the suspension of identity cards’ certificates impeded information exchange between citizens and the state. This type of e-threat discourse dominated especially the speeches of Estonian politicians. The potential manipulation of e-voting was constituted as the principal referent object in need of securitization. Parliamentary politicians—and not the digital experts—were the main ones to argue in an emotive fashion that Estonian democracy would come under threat because of manipulations to free elections. This is the reason why this particular threat discourse can be understood in the context of the political struggle accompanying the 2017 local elections which took place in October. A heated debate ensued among politicians over the security of e-voting; canceling the e-vote was repeatedly put on the table for security reasons. The Conservative People’s Party of Estonia (Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond, EKRE) and the Estonian Centre Party (Eesti Keskerakond) were the principal opponents of the e-vote and the initiators of governance as threat that de-problematizes the issue through emotive power of constructing an abstract “enemy”; they had also previously been skeptical of electronic voting. According to Mart Helme, chairman of the EKRE faction in Parliament, their party had come to the conclusion that the identity card vulnerability had created the risk of manipulation of votes and of influencing election results.

According to legal practice, it is enough that there exists a possibility of the violation of rights, any actual violation need not take place. In cancelling the e-vote, the probability of exploitation of the vulnerability does not matter, since it is not predictable by anyone. (Mart Helme, quoted in Reisenbuk 2017)

Jaanus Karilaid, vice chairman of the Centre Party, pointed to similar threats looming over the e-vote: “Democracy cannot have any vulnerabilities.” He then recommended that the election committee should, in coordination with experts, seriously consider whether it is appropriate to go forward with the e-vote in light of the vulnerability. “The Centre Party has always stressed that e-voting should be secure and transparent,” said Karilaid (quoted in Kund and Pau 2017).

Parties previously favorable of e-voting—Estonian Reform Party (Eesti Reformierakond) and Pro Patria and Res Publica Union (Isamaa ja Res Publica Liit, IRL)—did not change their position and expressed their support for the e-vote even after the disclosure of the vulnerability. “It is
low to connect this [vulnerability of Estonian ID-card] to the general debate over the reliability of e-voting, as does Mart Helme, using a spiteful rhetoric in hindsight,” said Urmas Reinsalu, the Minister of Internal Affairs from IRL (Olup 2017) de-problematizing the issue in a stoic phatic form of governance.

In accordance with the methodological guidelines proposed in the previous chapters, we should now ask under what circumstances would the discourse outlined thus far be a matter of course? The general logic of the e-voting debate between politicians was basically between emotive, phatic, and conative types of public communication. Politicians’ statements were primarily characterized by connecting the identity card vulnerability with the parties’ (Centre and Conservative) previous condemnatory positions toward e-voting, positions that were legitimized by the current situation. This is a common characteristic of phatic communication. Although no concrete evidence was provided for the manipulability of e-voting, it was depicted in the speeches of Helme and Karilaid as a future scenario that threatens the entire democratic order of Estonia. The emotive rhetoric of both emphasizes the lack of alternatives (“Democracy cannot have any vulnerabilities,” “...since it is not predictable by anyone”), which is often constitutive of conative public communication of “one and only solution” (see Selg 2013). This interlinking of explicitly emotive and implicitly conative communication is the core of securitization discourse as we outline it in the previous Sect. 6.2.1 and in Chapter 6. The dramatic visions of the future depicted in the threat discourse, point to the need of prohibiting e-voting right away. This is a form of conative communication.

The other position is characterized by the accusations made toward opponents because of the latter’s escalation of threats. Reinsalu depicted the positions of Helme and Karilaid on the dangers of e-voting as a typical political-rhetorical strategy of the opponents of e-voting (recall that both EKRE and the Centre Party had been against e-voting before) and displaced the issue from the problem (the security problems of the ID-card) to the personality of the speaker (“...as does Mart Helme, using a spiteful rhetoric in hindsight”). We may say that both are forms of de-problematizing the policy problem since they express the previous commonplaces about e-voting of different parties rather than on the issue of ID-card security risks.

The second domain of referent objects was the private sector. Here the discourse remained mainly referential. The central theme being the
potential disturbance in banking and electronic trade. In a flash interview to Postimees, Tanel Tammet, Professor of the Tallinn University of Technology, said: “I would personally say that e-commerce and, because of this, internet banking, are the main reasons for the large-scale use of electronic identity in Estonia” (quoted in Pau 2017b).

It was also stressed that any potential hacking and exploitation of personal data would be too time-consuming and expensive: it would require a separate hacking of each individual account:

In the future, any code is hackable; the question is, however, if and for whom is it feasible to splash a million Euros in order to access a pensioner’s bank account or steal a vote from the Minister of Social Affairs in order to support the Reform Party? [...] Hacking of one card would take 80 000 Euros. (Kund and Pau 2017)

We may say that the private sector as a referent object was initially addressed by journalists and experts in a deliberative manner of referential communication in the media. At the same time, the future e-threats were framed in terms of technifying securitization discourse, but the possible risk scenarios were attempted to be contained by rational arguments (economic inefficiency of hacking e-voting or accessing someone’s bank accounts). This referential form of communication aiming for dialogue and argumentation would be a matter of course in view of the general quality requirements of journalism. However, as we see later, the media did not stay at this level during the entire crisis and it is even one of the criticisms leveled against it by former politicians and also journalists themselves in their metalingual problematization of the role of media in constituting the crisis.

A much more forceful discourse of threat was articulated in relation to the third domain, damage to the Estonian e-state’s international reputation. Foreign media paid a significant amount of attention to security problems facing the Estonian identity card; renowned publications such as the Financial Times and the Frankfurter Allgemeine painted a rather dark picture of the theoretical security problems. Lauri Hussar, the editor-in-chief of Postimees at the time, summarized it in the following manner: “In principle, we can say that the reputation of the Estonian e-state is put in question and the journalists over-suspicious of the cyber world can now gloatingly state that our success story will become the flight of the Phoenix” (Hussar 2017). The identity card blunder was also covered by
the British technology news site The Register that had dug up an Estonian expletive for their title: “Kurat võtku!” (“Damn it!”) (Piir 2017). Reputation damage as the major threat accompanying the security risk of ID-cards was also highlighted by Estonian digital experts. According to journalists of Postimees, several analysts of the security of information technology found that the sole credible threat emerging from the vulnerability was the reputation damage: “If somebody really wanted to take advantage of the vulnerability, resources would most likely be spent on ruining Estonia’s reputation” (Kund and Pau 2017). In the discourse of “e-Estonia’s reputation damage” mainly phatic and poetic communication prevailed. Various poetic figures were used (e.g., “flight of the Phoenixes,” “Kurat võtku [“Damn it!”]” in English press). Of course, as we see later in the analysis, it remains quite unclear what exactly does Estonia’s international reputation damage consist of and what possible dangers are there for further developments of e-Estonia. Thus, in our terms governance as a kind of spin-doctoring cynicism combined with stoicism—de-problematization through poetic and phatic power—operated in linking the particular e-threat of ID-card vulnerability to the discourse of reputation damage. It would be a matter of course in view of the fact that e-Estonia’s reputation is a constitutive element of Estonian national identity and therefore more vexing an issue than the technical particularities of the concrete vulnerabilities of ID-card. We will come back to this aspect below (see, Sect. 9.4) when we analyze the hegemonic status of the reputation damage discourse in the constitution of e-threats in the crisis under question.

We can see that those three reference objects stemming from the security risks related to the ID-cards were constructed with different communication dominants from different perspectives. In the speeches by politicians that were mainly targeted to their electorate, mostly phatic and emotive rhetoric prevailed. Digital experts and journalists (at least at the beginning of the crisis) took a referential, context-oriented route in their communication. At the same time, both digital experts and technology journalists were present in articulating all the three securitized objects, but the possible damage for e-Estonia was not an important topic for the politicians.

Having first delineated the principal referent objects under threat, we can now use them in order to analyze (1) the distribution of active and passive social roles, (2) the urgency, and (3) the countermeasures of
e-threats in the representation of e-threats in the media coverage of Estonian identity card vulnerability. These three categories are constitutive of the problem as such, referring to the perceived causes, importance and also possible solutions to the problem. They help us analyze the constitution of e-threats in terms of problematization and de-problematization as governance strategies with their concomitant implications about power and democracy of these discourses.

9.2.3 Active and Passive Social Actors

According to Theo van Leeuwen (2008) active actors are represented as dominating and shaping a certain domain or action. Those in a passive role are, in turn, represented as the recipients and perceivers of a certain event (ibid., p. 33). Regarding e-threats, it is telling how the roles of the threatener and the threatened are expressed. As said above, because of the complexity of information technologies, it is often difficult to identify the dominating and controlling actors.

One of the first actors who articulated risk scenarios regarding the identity card was Gemalto (the producer of the cards) and its customer, the Police and Border Guard Board (PPA). Both attempted to locate the cause of the crisis in the other’s activity. Almost immediately when the vulnerability was picked up by the media, Gemalto launched a counter-communications operation, an operation that laid the principal blame on the PPA. Andreas Lehmann, representative of Gemalto Estonia and the CEO of Trüb Baltic AS, made a comment, on the social network LinkedIn, on a post made by Andres Kütt, the former chief architect of the e-state for Information System Authority (Riigi Infosüsteemi Amet, RIA). Lehmann claimed that he had notified Estonian authorities (PPA and RIA) of the vulnerability on June 15, 2017, and that the main reason why Estonia has remained passive and did not take measures to relieve the threats was that the authorities were on their summer vacation (cited in Tamm 2017). The official position of the Estonian state denied Lehmann’s statement. “The PPA received information of the identity card chip vulnerability from RIA on August 31,” stated Martin Luige, spokesperson of the PPA (quoted in Gavronski 2017). Claims made by Lehmann did, in fact, later turn out to be nonverifiable; Lehmann was transferred to a different position. The mutual accusations made by Gemalto and PPA should be viewed in the context of the process of negotiating a solution for the compensation of damages, a process that
aimed to identify the main culprit for the crisis (Lõugas 2018a). This is the reason why, based on the speaker’s position, the opponent was depicted either as the generator of the problem or as the one suffering because of it. Here the discourse remained overwhelmingly conative trying to address the culprit of the problem directly and partly referential because a concrete manufacturer of ID-cards was pointed to as an instigator of the e-threat. At the same time, the discourse offers us no information about the situation of other e-security systems of Estonia. Also, no discussion of solving the problem is present, but mainly there is an issue of identifying a particular culprit. The latter might be necessary for assigning responsibility for the problems emerging from the security risks but is secondary in view of organizing the countermeasures or solving the problem.

The second actor represented in the discourse of Estonian identity card vulnerability was Russia. Mart Helme pointed to the Russian special services—more precisely, to the Foreign Intelligence Service—and to their interests toward Estonian elections. “Let us recall that Russia has also been previously accused of interfering with elections in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the USA. Now the time has come for Estonia,” said Helme (Kund and Pau 2017) in an emotive and conative fashion. Regarding Helme’s comment, it is important to underline that Russia was not understood to be the cause of the problem, but a possible beneficiary and abuser of the vulnerability; in other words, Russia is represented as an active participant in magnifying e-threats.

Helme’s pointing to Russia would be, again, a matter of course when we put it in the context of the 2017 local election, because besides politicians—for whom the Russian threat is an important rhetorical tool used in scare tactics—no one named Russia as an active agent. Helme was soon countered by EKRE’s principal ideological opponent, the Social Democratic Party (Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond, SDE). Hannes Hanso, the former Minister of Defense from SDE, claimed that Russian hacking of Estonian e-voting system is highly unlikely (cited in Velsker 2017). Therefore, we can again witness the confrontation of two forms of de-problematization of the policy issue—the emotive and phatic attempt to constitute the way of speaking of the actor of e-threat. The Conservative (EKRE’s) appeal to Russia’s secret plotting is a matter of course given that the threat of Russia has played a constitutive role in the public discourse of Estonia since its regaining of independence in 1991 and was also crucial in the private discourse during the Soviet occupation of the country (1940–1991) (see Annus 2019). Russia has been a typical locus commune of the
enemy of Estonia. Given that, it is not surprising that globally covered Kremlin hackers and their role in intervening the presidential elections of USA and France, and the parliamentary elections in Germany and Britain during the previous couple of years found its continuation also in Estonian political rhetoric. In the discussions of the possible experiences of threat from Russia potential victims were, however, not elaborated. Also, when speaking about the potential consequences of Russia’s manipulation of e-voting it was not specified, whether the interference would have as its aim to promote a specific political force or to damage Estonia’s e-state reputation more generally.

The third type of actors represented in the media were hackers. “From the moment when the work of Czechs was disclosed and when it became clear that the deficiency was, in addition, caused by Slovaks, Spaniards, Germans, and the services of Microsoft and Google, international attention grew to a point where those type of people emerged whose interest it is to pry open our cards,” said the CEO of CERT-EE Klaid Mägi (quoted in Pau and Berendson 2017). It was considered theoretically possible for hackers to create a digital clone of an Estonian resident and pose as him/her on the internet—providing that the hackers possessed enough monetary means, of course. Mark Erlich, technology consultant of RIA, described it as follows:

> If someone could clone a digital ID, he could theoretically use the identity card for personal identification and for signing documents digitally without possessing a card him or herself and without knowing the PIN codes.
> (quoted in Kund and Pau 2017)

The discourse on hackers did not determine; however, how the hackers would have actively used the digital clone and what would the security threats be for groups under the specific attack. Possible threats to banking (e.g., stealing of people’s bank accounts) and disturbances in communication between the e-state and e-citizens were, to be sure, pointed out, but, as said above when mapping out referent objects, these actions were regarded as unlikely because of their expense and technical complexity. The identity of the hackers was left indeterminate; references were made to those types and crooks, the opposition of the good hackers (scientists) and the bad hackers (cybercriminals) was used—naming strategies common when referring to actors operating in secrecy. Therefore, the discourse constituting the hackers was a form of emotive disruption (the possibility
of bad hackers’ attack) counterbalanced by the referential communication (pointing to the technical difficulties and expense in carrying the hacking through).

The fourth group of actors were the public relations specialists of the Estonian government, and it relates mostly to the reference domain of reputation damage of e-Estonia. Serious deficiencies were spotted in their work, especially in their actions in informing the public of the identity card vulnerability and the accompanying risks. Many were of the opinion that the public relations department did not so much to inform the public as it exploited the crisis in the pre-election struggle. Lauri Hussar, the editor-in-chief of Postimees, for example, said in a self-reflexive ironic—that is metalingual—manner:

Upon closer inspection, we must, unfortunately, admit that we ourselves have been the greatest threat to the reputation of our e-state. If only the theoretical vulnerability had been addressed differently, not involving the Prime Minister and the politicians, coverage of the topic would have been far more moderate. (Hussar 2017, italics added)

This kind of metalingual communication was taken up also by some politicians. Hanno Pevkur, former chairman of the Reform Party, pointed to the pre-election struggle as a principal cause of damage done to Estonia’s reputation: “If we talk about the reliability of e-services and the reputation of the Estonian state, then this is no place for scoring political points” (Kund and Pau 2017). Aivar Pau, a journalist of Postimees, also pointed to the reprehensible connections between the escalation of e-threats regarding the identity card vulnerability and the upcoming elections: “The PR show served only one purpose: the desire of Jüri Ratas to discredit the e-vote” (Pau 2017c). The journalist also accused the public relations specialists of “sowing panic.” Instead of informing the public of potential e-risks, an opposite outcome resulted: “This is the first case in Estonia in which the crisis is generated by the communication of crisis itself9” (Pau 2017d; see also Kiin 2017). Aivar Pau also brought out the potential target groups for the government’s crisis communication: “criminals and the people” (Pau 2017d).

Thus, the public relations department of the prime minister’s office was represented as a primary actor, an actor exploiting the topic of identity card vulnerability in order to amplify the media coverage of the prime minister and of the parliamentary politicians, and in order to put certain
political themes (opposition to e-voting) into the media agenda. The public as a whole was represented as the primary “victim,” needlessly and excessively scared. In these statements, the e-threats were constructed mainly metalingually and partly in a conative way. The major threat was seen not in the vulnerability of the ID-card itself: even Prime Minister Jüri Ratas admitted that the threat was “theoretical” after claiming that he had been consulting with top specialists of the field (Pärgma 2017). Instead, the primary issue in these metalingual reflections was the way the vulnerability was communicated. If the government had communicated the risk factors related to ID-card differently, Estonia would have gotten quite different discourse of the e-threats. Government and the prime minister, however, were depicted as central actors in causing the reputation damage of e-Estonia, with their wish to gain as large as possible a media coverage by talking about a “theoretical threat” or an improbable future scenario. At the same time, the Estonian public was depicted as a passive victim of the hysteria caused by governance.

Related to that: in a metalingual discourse with the opposite direction, the media was depicted as an important actor in constructing the e-threats. The first reproach made to the journalists was their incompetence in covering the complex topic of information technology. The former President of Estonia (and a spokesperson of e-Estonia) Toomas Hendrik Ilves pointed out that the problems of Estonian e-solutions are technically complex and complicated, which is why talking about them and delving into them “requires both time and technical nous. As the articles in the Frankfurter Allgemeine and the Financial Times showed, many are not up to the task” (quoted in Beltadze 2017). In addition to the complexity of digital technologies, the clickbait logic of media economy, corrupting journalists’ work ethic, was pointed to as amplifiers of the threat discourse and a source of incompetency.

Superficial treatments are always a journalistic risk in the case of complex topics. One does not go deep enough, does not bother to properly engage. In case of these type of stories, I find myself thinking that the press does not always realize the responsibility that comes with writing. It is not an intentional lie, but carelessness and clickbait attraction. (Ilves, quoted in Beltadze 2017)
Journalists were thus represented as the amplifiers of the crisis and partly as the generators of it. The superficiality and inadequacy of the media coverage was seen as a result of structural changes in the journalist profession (shorter articles, catchy and often more negative interpretations of topics, the need to gain clicks, etc.). Here too we can see a metalingual coding of messages, in which not the threat itself, but the way it is spoken about is addressed. For the most part, these depicted threats that shape the discourse are external to the particular e-threat discourse (risks related to the ID-card) and characteristic of the working of the entire journalistic field (shorter articles, attention-grabbing, etc.). Thus, we can say that when it comes to the construction of the particular reference object of ID-card security risks, then governance as de-problematization prevailed. At the same time, metalingual problematization was dominant regarding the journalistic language used for mediating the crisis.

9.2.4 Articulation of the Urgency of Threats

An important aspect in representing e-threats is the expression of their urgency, or in other words, the way they are depicted as in need of fast and forceful reaction. This, in turn, presupposes the outlining of terrifying future scenarios which illustrate the realization of threats (Hansen and Nissenbaum 2009, p. 1164). Another significant rhetorical device in representing the potential consequences of cyberthreats is the construction of analogies to tragic historical events, for example, to 9/11, Pearl Harbor, or natural disasters (Jarvis et al. 2016, p. 620). A third discursive strategy with which to emphasize the unavoidability of threats is based on charging utterances with emotions. Especially negative emotions attract the public’s attention and intensify the sense of fear. This strategy is present, for example, in expressions of concern or in condemnations of certain developments, in the usage of value judgments (e.g., terrible, dreadful, dangerous) or the employment of vocabulary with negative tones (e.g., problem, conflict, damage) (Bednarek and Caple 2017, p. 79).

The dominant rhetorical device in representations of the urgency of threats to national security and reputation damage was to imagine terrifying future scenarios. As already noted above, the politicians of EKRE questioned the security of e-voting in general because of the identity card scandal. Their leading politician Martin Helme voiced the increasing gravity of the threat because of its extensive coverage in the media. Justifying the necessity to cancel the e-vote, he noted: “It is a fact that no
one can guarantee that manipulations won’t take place, especially now when information regarding the vulnerability and its causes has spread all over the world” (quoted in Reisenbuk 2017, italics added). Expressing himself in this emotive and conative manner, Martin Helme essentially stated that the IT experts could not possibly solve the problem, which is why it would be necessary, to guarantee security, to cancel the e-vote. In the article in question, the attacks were addressed in a rather abstract manner, without specifying either the potential details of their execution or any concrete aggressors. A similar line of thought, namely that extensive media coverage has turned the vulnerability into an attractive target for attacks, was also repeated by other authors. The journalist Aivar Pau (2017d, italics added) stated, for example, that “if, by any chance, there previously existed a crook ignorant of the vulnerability, then now they would have definitely gotten all the information necessary for hacking.”

The emerging threats related to the identity card were represented as needing a swift reaction—potential attacks just a couple of days in the future were premediated. Thus, Postimees reported on the position of a state official:

The time given to us is coming to an end while our information systems constantly crash. The time for updating will run out very shortly. The threat assessment, or the black scenario, goes as follows: an attack on the security system of the Estonian identity card chip will occur on Friday or Saturday the latest. (Pau and Berendson 2017, italics added)

This statement clearly expresses both a recognition of signs of threat (constantly failing information systems) and the imminent actualization of risks. Underlining the high probability that attacks might be taking place, the article stated: “The target is extremely attractive for attacking. Furthermore, it is more likely that hackers will attack in the next 48 hours than that they will not” (Pau and Berendson 2017, italics added).

A little over half of all the media reporting of the identity card vulnerability contained condemning or fearful judgments of the events. For instance: “A high ranking state official who has been dealing with the identity card vulnerability for the last couple of days, yesterday said to Postimees, ‘The situation is terrible’” (Pau and Berendson 2017). When speaking of the vulnerability, a range of negatively charged words was used to refer to the events of autumn 2017: crisis, (security) risk, threat. In articles speaking of the threat to Estonian digital infrastructure or to
e-voting, a lot of talk of potential attacks and of the vulnerability of systems occurred. References to the clearly negative term manipulation were quite common. Manipulation was the most mentioned regarding both the potential tampering with the e-vote and the unproportionate scaring of the public with the threats accompanying e-voting.

Journalists reporting the positions of government officials, used, when speaking of e-threats, an hyper-securitizing style—they envisioned extensively and imminently escalating risks with indeterminate reference. The article in question was dramatically entitled: “The ID-scare promises to turn into a catastrophe”—characterizing the gravity and future-oriented nature of the threats. Referent objects were represented as diffuse and omnipresent; for example:

While a couple of months ago, at the time of the publication of the news story coined as the e-scare, the potential target was only the vulnerability of the Estonian identity card chip, now the risk assessment is already global. It entails large corporations and other countries using a similar chip technology. (Pau and Berendson 2017, italics added)

Such a claim was related to the information revealed in the meanwhile, which also implicated the e-services of Microsoft and Google, and Slovakia, Spain and Germany that had also collaborated with Gemalto.

In the construction of the discourse of the unavoidability of technological vulnerability as an e-threat (hacking, collapse of the other ID-systems, etc.), we can see, again, the prevalence of mainly emotive and conative communication. In addresses where e-threats are considered real, the different threatened reference objects are tied together into a singular hyper-securitized reference object—the entire existence of e-Estonia is threatened.

Damages to the reputation of the Estonian e-state were also talked about as a pervasive problem, but one only actualizing in the future. The closing lines of Lauri Hussar’s opinion piece exemplify this kind of attitude: “Damage to Estonia’s reputation is already done and the opportunity to remedy the situation even a little will present itself at the end of the month at the European Union summit on digital technology. There is nothing more nor less at stake than the reputation of the Estonian e-state” (Hussar 2017). The media often repeated the idea that the identity card vulnerability puts Estonia’s image as a frontrunner in digital technology at risk. On the one hand, it was stressed that the trustworthiness of Estonia’s
e-systems could be put under question. On the other, it was even argued that the security risk may jeopardize our innovative e-infrastructure, and it may be replaced with its old primitive version. In order to refer to such negative developments, the following phrase was used: “from the progress of e-state, back to the stone age” (Pau and Berendson 2017).

Media coverage that dealt with reputation damages to e-Estonia also used the term vulnerability scandal to refer to the event. This term indicates that the vulnerability had been turned into a sensational media event. A similar tone was conveyed by the terms PR show and crisis communication that generates the crisis. The phrase damage to reputation and the verb blemish that refers to malicious infringement were used quite often. To qualify the public’s reactions and the media coverage itself, condemnatory terms or even ones referring to psychopathology were used: panic and hysteria. Henrik Roonemaa (2017) from Postimees used the metaphors of panic and hysteria forcefully in his opinion piece: “In the phase of hysteria, the dust from the tumult has not yet settled, so that nothing can be seen clearly. […] There is no point, in this type of a situation, to wave one’s hands in the dust and to panic. After some time has passed, everything will become much clearer.” Such a wording expressed the author’s condemnatory attitude toward the media’s overreaction and toward the excessive anxiety displayed by citizens.

To highlight the gravity of the threat, previous disasters that had shocked Estonia were referred to. The technology journalist Hendrik Roonemaa uses a figurative comparison in his opinion piece: “The storm of the century is raging for the Estonian e-state. […] During an emergency situation it is wise not to stick your nose out and instead accept it – unless urgently necessary” (Roonemaa 2017). The comparison made is probably to the January storm that hit Western Estonia in 2005, a storm that caused extensive flooding in Pärnu and Haapsalu.

The problem of damage to Estonia’s reputation as a reference object is not seen as a possible problem of the cyber domain, but mainly as a discursive problem. In other words, the main question is, how can Estonia maintain its reputation as a strong e-state? Those who are critical of the media coverage of the events use emotionally charged expressions (“The storm of the century is raging for the Estonian e-state,” “hysteria,” etc.). The question of whether the problem of e-threats is real is not the primary object of discussion, but rather the media coverage of them. Even if the threats might turn out to be a false alarm, it gets escalated as a problem.
Therefore, it is a matter of course that in construction of the urgency of e-threats the emotive communication prevails.

### 9.2.5 Ways of Managing Threats

A logic of the discourse of digital securitization is: if certain measures are not taken, grave events will occur in the near future (Hansen and Nissenbaum 2009, p. 1161). Thus, at least some solutions—even if only implicitly—are given in a discourse of threats. Because of the technical complexity of e-threats, public discourse tends to associate facing and fighting them with a relatively small group of experts possessing knowledge of the field (Hansen and Nissenbaum 2009, p. 1167). Informing the public of countermeasures to e-threats is thus a crucial component in a discourse of e-threats and expresses one of the important aspects from the viewpoint of our book: problematization and de-problematization of e-threats. This is a surprising fact, given our background knowledge: one would presume that informing the public would entail referential-deliberative communication since containing e-threats can only work successfully if the e-threats are somehow defined. In other words, one would expect “sticking to the point” when it comes to e-threats. Except for very few experts, this basically has not happened. What would make such a situation an unsurprising fact or a matter of course?

Let us look first to the countermeasures offered. In the discourse of Estonian identity card vulnerability, the following were mentioned: (a) technical countermeasures are taken in order to prevent attacks to identity cards with the vulnerability and (b) structural countermeasures either taken or planned to be developed in the case, similar digital problems occur in the future.

The first category—technical—involves, first and foremost, restrictions on the usage of identity cards, restrictions applied in fear of potential hacking. On September 5, the day that the media first reported the problem, the PPA suspended the public keys database. The keys enabled encryption and decryption of files—only the owner of the key can decrypt a file sent to him or her. The other significant measure was taken at the beginning of November. All identity cards with the vulnerability were suspended because issuing new cards did not go according to plan and experts feared a hacking attack (Pau and Berendson 2017). The production of an updated version of the identity card, issued in 2018, also counts as a countermeasure (Lõugas 2018b). Some domains of the private sector
were also involved in organized countermeasures. RIA advised citizens to adopt mobile identity (Velsker 2017) and, after the disclosure of identity card vulnerability, the Estonian mobile service providers were prepared for the increase in demand (Postimees 2017).

Legitimization of the above-mentioned countermeasures occurred in the context of a threat discourse on hacking and digital cloning. The countermeasures were supposed to diminish the (anyway theoretical) threat even further. In our analysis, we did not find a single media report that would have mentioned a successful hacking of identity cards with the vulnerability.

The structural countermeasures regarding management had to do with gaining better control of the whole system and with the prevention of potential future security problems. Taimar Peterkopf, the general manager of RIA, said in an interview:

> If we wish also in the future to act as a role model and be among the leaders of digital states, then the politicians have to put more resources and attention to the field. For this purpose, we could appoint a separate minister. (Lõugas 2018c)

In addition, it was pointed out that too few specialists knowledgeable of identity card security worked in the public sector. Rain Ottis, the head of Centre for Digital Forensics and Cyber Security at the Tallinn University of Technology, introducing a report on the identity card security crisis, said that the crisis was largely survived thanks to the specialists working in the private sector: “Whether the private sector, academic sector or the public sector – it is not possible to unite them all under the same roof. There is nothing bad in that, however, when we have the specialists in the private sector, given that they are available to the government during emergencies” (quoted in Piir 2018).

Both of these countermeasures—restructuring of the field dealing with cyber-security and increasing the number of specialists in digital technology—were justified by the position and reputation of Estonia as a leading e-state. Potential e-threats inevitably accompany the structures of the Estonian e-state. Both the experts (e.g., an interview with Anto Veldre [Leivak 2017]) and the spokespersons of e-Estonia (e.g., Toomas Hendrik Ilves) highlighted that the cyber domain evolves continuously and that this always involves a possibility of specific risks. “The security risks [accompanying the identity card] are inevitable. Actual cyberthreat
is preventable” (Beltadze 2017). Andrus Ansip, the Vice-President of the European Commission, said that at the present moment when the e-state’s solutions face special scrutiny—since Estonia holds the presidency of the Council of the European Union—“quick problem solving can demonstrate our strength” (quoted in Velsker 2017) and help compensate for the damage to our reputation in the international arena.

Thus, according to this discourse, the countermeasures against the reputation damage can only be those of strategic communication. They should restore Estonia’s position as a leading digital state. For avoiding possible damages to reputation in the future, threats like that should be announced by an ICT specialist or a minister specializing in the field, not the prime minister. Thus Sirje Künk, a literary scholar and communications specialist, noted in her opinion piece (2017) that, although informing the public of the identity card vulnerability was entirely justified, it should have been done not by the prime minister, but by either RIA, Estonia’s top IT experts or by the minister of the respective field.

Did this type of top-level political attention grabbing not damage the reputation of the Estonian state even more than one (although, granted, a large-scale one) identity card security threat – one that, furthermore, was not caused by an error made in Estonia, but by the chips imported from elsewhere. (Künk 2017)

We can say that technological countermeasures to possible (future) problems are constituted overwhelmingly in referential-deliberative manner, where concrete measures are indicated. Structural countermeasures are instead articulated in a fuzzy manner without clear indication to the problems that they might be solving. It is true, though, that this is partly conditioned by the very character of the countermeasures themselves—they have to prevent possible future problems in their whole.

Next, we will analyze our research results from the viewpoint of political semiotics in a more general way and bring out the semiotic mechanisms of problematization and de-problematization and their consequences regarding democracy and power.
9.3 The Semiotic Logic of the Constitution of the Scenarios of Security Risks

As we already pointed out in the beginning of this chapter, securitization is a discursive act with a specific rhetorical structure and political effect, an act that represents referent objects as existentially threatened; consequently, a successful securitizer can persuade his or her audience to take measures unthinkable outside the emergency situation (Buzan et al. 1998, p. 5). In political semiotic terms, we could say that it is emotive governance as de-problematization for the sake of conative governance as hierarchization. This emotive-conative logic is operative in the constitution of e-threats too.

The e-threats that we analyzed above can be divided into two: (1) concrete (actual or possible, that is, in the future); (2) abstract or based on reference that is articulated in a relatively ambiguous manner. As their name indicates, concrete e-threats are relatively clear-cut and localizable. The articulation of abstract threats, however, entails the constitution of extensive sources of threat (covering several domains of life); the omnipresence and difficulty of identification of these sources is underlined.

From the political semiotics point of view, it is crucial to analyze which semiotic mechanisms are used to speak of e-threats and how different actors, referent objects, and threat scenarios are woven together into a whole in the formation of the e-threats discourse of the vulnerability of the Estonian identity card. As we already described in Chapter 5, semiotics of culture differentiates between two fundamental types of discursive relations: (1) approximate or non-discrete logic of signification based on similarity and analogy; (2) discrete or verbal logic based on the regularized connection of elements, for example, chronologically and according to relations of cause and effect or part and whole (Lotman 2004). As we added in the 5th and 6th chapters, these two logics correspond to metaphoric and metonymic poles of discourse. In addition, metaphoric pole corresponds to the logic of de-problematization in governance de-democratization in democracy, and metonymic pole corresponds to problematization (governance) and democratization (democracy) (see Table 6.1 in Chapter 6 and Fig. 7.1 in Chapter 7). The discourse of e-threats is characterized, first and foremost, by non-discrete or metaphoric signification. Thus, offhand at least, we could characterize the constitution of the entire e-threat discourse as de-problemizing
and de-democratizing, working considerably through poetic, phatic, and emotive power. In such a discourse, relations between the causes and effects of threats, as well as the sense of fear stemming from the risk, are ambiguously articulated.

In the texts we analyzed, the abstract nature of threats was mainly expressed by the indeterminateness of actors and by future threats that were defined relatively vaguely. The texts described the boundaries of the referent objects of securitization, the relations between them, and the actors behind threat scenarios in a vague manner. Thus, in order to refer to active actors, the texts used the terms “bad hackers” and “crooks” whose potential actions (e.g., the possible uses of digital clones) and motivations were left unspecified—which is why these actors proved to be almost impossible to identify. A similar construction of relations can be seen in the discourse concerning the interference in e-voting. While a dangerous activity—manipulating the process of e-voting—was concretely named, it was not specified how exactly is it possible to interfere in the voting process, who would commit the interference, and whose interests the interference would have served in the local election. The Russian card played by the Conservative Party can be understood as a strategy attempting to influence the constituency with fear of Russia. It is remarkable that such a hypothetical threat with a relatively vague reference was linked to a larger cascade of threats, thus connecting the identity card vulnerability with something so fundamental as the subversion of the Estonian democratic social order.

One characteristic of the abstract threat discourse was the articulation of scenarios of e-threats based on an analogy. The purpose here was to envision and exemplify both the high probability and the terrible consequences of potential attacks. Analogies were made to events of recent history (Russian interference in French, German, British, and American general elections, “the storm of the century”). Hypothetical future scenarios drew parallels between the tense present situation (failings in updates to information systems) and threats soon to be actualized (large-scale attacks on citizens’ e-identity or on the Estonian digital infrastructure).

Since an analogy describes one object by a metaphorical substitution with another, the addressee of the message is often tasked with creating his or her own image of the relations between the elements referring to the referent object. The relations are often only defined by a mere
reference to analogy or by an act of naming—a clear example of non-discrete construction of relations, according to Juri Lotman (Lotman 1997; Ventsel and Madisson 2017, see also Ventsel 2014, 2016; Selg and Ventsel 2008, 2010).

Besides analogy, the characteristic discursive ambiguity was expressed in the description of countermeasures to be taken in order to defend the securitized referent objects. This description was often characterized by a sense of urgency in the problem. Crisis, (security) risk, and panic were constituted, in public discourse, as titles for the event—all referring to an urgent need to remedy the situation and to find quick solutions. In order to manage e-threats, however, relatively abstract and future-oriented instructions were presented. Taimar Peterkopf, the general manager of RIA, is somewhat indeterminate in his description of the professional tasks of a proposed ID-minister: the minister would “set an ambition and create a political demand for fast progress” (Lõugas 2018b). It is not clear what would be done better or differently in case of a possibly emerging crisis communication. But of course, to manage the identity card security risks, some very concrete measures were also taken (see Sect. 9.2.5 of this chapter).

We can say that such phatic, emotive, and conative communication is characteristic of the discourse of threat, where metaphoric/non-discrete logic prevails. A significant difference was between talking about reference objects, sources of threats, or the culprit. Thus, a concrete actor was brought out (reference to a typical locus commune of the evil, such as Russia), but their concrete actions and the results of that were depicted in an extremely vague way or not at all. Instead, through emotive vocabulary, the possible results of their actions were depicted. This means that in the constitution of the reference object there is a movement toward creating increasingly metaphoric or non-discrete links, in which from the “evil” nature of the subject the consequences of its actions are derived.

The tendency to code discretely or metonymically was rare and was mainly related to depicting concrete actors responsible and possible solutions to the problem. Depending on the reference object, the discussion of problem solution was mainly dominated by the conative function of language, less frequently referential and metalingual functions. For example, in case of Prime Minister Ratas’ and the government’s PR-team, who were identified as the generators of e-threats, they were accused of sowing panic to the public and of damaging the international reputation of the e-state. Here, as in the case of the Russian hackers, we
have a concrete culprit (the PR-team of the prime minister and government) who, talking about a “theoretical” security risk, created actual e-risk scenarios. The excessive and disproportionate communication of risks stemming from the vulnerability was seen as a direct cause of the reputation damage. Unsuccessful communication was represented as a factor undermining—both at the national and international level—trust in Estonian digital infrastructure and Estonia’s image as an e-frontrunner (Ventsel and Madisson 2019). The latter was perceived as especially problematic since this image is a cornerstone of positive and future-oriented national identity. This communication was in the discourse associated with pre-election political struggle, but also to the difficult to grasp nature of information technology. The key to problem-solving is perceived to be changing the strategy of public communication of the PR-team, and in charting the concrete threats related to the ID-cards resulting in less panic and fear in the future. However, in describing the e-threats, we see clearly the prevalence of non-discrete/metaphoric emotive communication. It manifested itself first and foremost in the determination of the reference object related to the damage to reputation, which can be considered a hegemonic discourse in the entire ID-card risk discourse.

9.4 Reputation Damage as a Hegemonic “Empty Signifier” in the Discourse of ID-Security Risks

According to the political logic of the semiosphere, as outlined in Chapter 5, every system of meaning (discourse, semiosphere) is always asymmetric in the sense that some of its elements are more at the center and others are either pushed to the periphery or even totally excluded. In that sense, each discourse is always articulated around the center that represents the discourse as a whole, providing this way unity and boundedness of its system of elements. This center is not given, and the concrete content of center and periphery of discourse or semiosphere is a result of translation processes. This we can also see in the discourse of the e-threats under question, which revolves around the discourse of reputation damage. As already discussed, Laclau calls these kinds of centers “empty signifiers” pointing to the “emptiness” of the center from the viewpoint of singular/specific meaning: these are signifiers that tend to mean everything and nothing, but at the same time can unite very different meanings into a unified whole—making it the center of this unified whole. But how can a discourse (of reputation damage) be an “empty signifier”? As
we have argued elsewhere: “The ‘empty signifier’ might be misleading as a term, leading to an impression that the function of a center corresponding to it, could be played only by single words or symbols. In the Laclauian/Lotmanian vocabulary the role of a center could as well be played by a narrative” (Selg and Ruutsoo 2014, p. 369). Analytically speaking: “elements” of discourse can themselves be discourses, or vice versa: a discourse is usually embedded in another (wider) discourse. Thus, talking about the discourse of reputation damage as an empty signifier unifying the (wider) e-threats discourse under investigation makes sense. Let us now look at the details of this relation.

The threat scenarios related to reputation damage emerging from the 2017 autumn crisis were covered by all the analyzed media outlets, and it was in one way or another marked as a major problem by journalists, experts, and some opposition politicians.

Even though at the level of actor we can point to the PR-team of the government as a concrete “culprit,” the concrete meaning of reputation damage was, however, left unspecified. The word reputation is in itself rather ambiguous; any specific descriptions of what would the damage to reputation entail and whose reputation it was that was damaged—or, what was the concrete referent object—never became clear. Using the vocabulary of the Copenhagen school of securitization, the characteristics of hyper-securitization were present in the media coverage of reputation damage; the latter was constituted as an umbrella that gathered together different threatened referent objects. Reputation damage and ineffective communication became the meta-level—operating outside specific discourses of threat—generators of causality. The extensive and intensive coverage of the event was pointed to as a factor increasing the probability of attack since the coverage supposedly resulted in drawing the attention of both the hackers and forces hostile to Estonia to the identity card and the Estonian digital infrastructure.

Offhand the observation that it is the emotive reputation damage discourse that became the center of the hegemonic empty signifier in the ID-card vulnerability discourse is a surprising fact. But it is a matter of course if we look at it from the broader context of Estonian culture. It is inextricably linked to the discourse of Estonian identity after regaining independence, and the cyber-optimistic discourse became an important dominant of the Estonian future-oriented identity. Public self-descriptions started to emphasize the importance of national IT solutions that facilitate the development of deliberative democracy and the emancipation
of citizens. “The rapid development of the e-state was understood as a key to success: as something that makes Estonia to stand out against the background of other post-Soviet countries and brings us closer to the Western values” (Mädisson 2017, p. 147). The identity of e-Estonia and its possible damage at the international arena was one of the grounds for the hegemonic status of the emotive discourse of *reputation damage* in the discourse of ID-card risks—it became a hyper-securitized discursive strategy in articulating e-threats. At the same time, it is an example of poetic constitution of the reference object—using equivalence to create a sequence in Jakobson’s terms (see Chapter 6, Sect. 6.2.2)—and in that sense an example of de-problematizing it: problems related to security risks of the ID-card vulnerability are not coded as field-specific and belonging to the cyber domain but as a problem of (national) identity. For creating such a sequence through equivalence, various poetic analogies and metaphors are used (“storm of the century,” “back to the stone age,” etc.). Lotman has pointed out that the relationship between text (the threatened reputation of the e-Estonia in this case) and the cultural context can be either metonymic or metaphoric. This is because cultural context itself is complex and heterogeneous, and that is the reason why one and the same text can relate differently to different layers of the context (Lotman 1988). Taking into account the constitutive logic of political semiotic explanation, we can say that the *reputation damage* discourse does not mediate the context, but the text creates the context. The hegemonic status of the *reputation damage* discourse is constituted through metaphoric translation, where it is perceived as a substitute for the entire context, where the text is in many ways equivalent to context. Discrete description of the links between phenomena is subordinated to substituting the context as a whole: e-Estonia as an essential anchor of the identity of Estonians is subverted as a whole through the reputation damage stemming from the media coverage of the ID-card crisis and replaced by national identity as a securitized reference object. At the same time, the consequences of reputation damage are perceived as global and reaching all the domains: both the international reputation of Estonia as a leading digital state, as well as the trust of local people in the digital infrastructure of Estonia and therefore in the state as a whole are under fire. Therefore, the emotive discourse of *reputation damage* functions as a hegemonic empty signifier—signifying the entire context and through that subverting the particular specificity of different domains involved and uniting them into moments of a unified discourse.
9.5 Conclusion: The Constitution of e-Threats as Problems of Power, Governance, and Democracy

The analysis of the current case sets no goal to identify the “real” e-risks and their causes related to the ID-card crisis of 2017 in Estonia. As risk theorists argue (see Beck 1999; Giddens 1990) risks are always in the future, and in that sense, their ontological status is always secondary compared to past events. Our aim was to show that through the interplay of different communication types different causes are constituted to the problems of e-threats and the future risk scenarios for their handling for the affected parties. This relates them to an important feature of “wicked problems” already highlighted in the most classical text of the topic by Rittel and Webber (1973, p. 166): “The existence of a discrepancy representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways. The choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem’s solution.” One of the explanations of why there are “numerous ways” of explaining one and the same problem for the affected parties can be found in the heterogeneity of communication strategies involved in the constitution of the problem. And semiotic analysis helps to bring that out. For instance, one explanation of the problem we identified was pointing to the Gemalto company as a manufacturer of defective ID-cards. Another one is pointing to the PR-team of the prime minister who made the e-risk into a “catastrophe.” Yet another one could be the clickbait logic and lack of technological competency of contemporary journalism, or the de-problematization strategies employed by both government politicians and the opposition. And so on. All these explanations of one and the same problem use different forms of power—poetic, phatic, metalingual, referential, conative, and emotive. And through that, they constitute various forms of governance that can also be assessed normatively (including from the viewpoint of the working of democracy) and critically: some forms of governance and democracy are preferable over others in certain situations but less so in different contexts. And making those inferences—abductive and constitutive, but still inferences—is where political semiotics is of utmost importance.

From the cultural semiotic point of view underlying political semiotics, the appropriateness of certain communication type is determined by the functional appropriateness in the specific communication situation. The function of a text realizes only through the system, through the relation between the addressee/addressee of the text and its realization (Lotman
The cultural semiotic approach enables to view the constitution of e-threats through multiple perspectives and according to the functions each message fulfills in the constitution of the discourse of e-threats. Political semiotics adds a critical/normative lens for this analysis of communication.

We can, for instance, be critical of the prevalence of emotive communication when the issue of solving a certain problem is at stake. At the same time, it could be that getting the emotive attention to a problem might even be justified at a certain point: think of for instance the climate activism reaching a global scale increasingly, especially over the last year or so after the powerful and often emotive discourse surrounding the Swedish teenage activist Greta Thunberg. When discussing the social-communicative functions of texts, Lotman emphasizes that there has to be an inevitable overlap between the memory systems of the addresser and the addressee, that would enable the text to convey information (1988). Otherwise, the text (the news) is unable to gain enough attention. The latter, however, is as crucial for the problematization as the problem itself. Therefore, it is understandable—a matter of course—that in the constitution of the discourse of e-threats, there is an (emotive) appeal to features central to the identity of the auditorium, which would make it easier for the latter to recognize the problem.

At the same time, such an emotive (more generally metaphoric) coding is generally a hindrance to effective governance (solving) of problems. The latter would entail, rather, a more deliberative-referential or metalingual-agonistic communication that would constitute a more metonymic political discourse through discrete coding, which operates through analytical-logical-factual thinking. Less technically put, this would be “sticking to the point” in the discussion of governance problems, while the prevalence of emotive communication is more or less the opposite process.

At the same time, one of the socio-communicative functions of the discourse of the e-threats in Estonia was cultural auto-communication or self-reflectivity. During this type of communication, a “text [is] helping to reorganize the personality of the reader and change its structural self-orientation” (Lotman 1988, p. 55). The “reader” in our case could be considered the Estonian public for whom, as we mentioned, the success story of e-Estonia forms an important part of the discourse of the Estonian identity, both domestically and internationally. The discourse of e-threat related to the vulnerability of ID-card acts here as a catalyst
for self-reflection and as an auto-communicative process of the reader. In the current case, we saw that both the identity-protecting positions emerged and those critical toward it. At the same time, in both cases, the de-problematizing logic of communication prevailed.

In conclusion, analyzing the discourse related to the security risks of the Estonian ID-cards enabled us to shed light on the semiotic mechanisms of the constitution of (potentially) “wicked problems.” We are not arguing, of course, that the ID-security problem is merely discursive in nature. However, we do want to point out that the way these kinds of problems are constituted in the public discourse, and which discourses become dominant—empty signifiers in Laclau’s sense—has, in turn, a constitutive role to play in how these problems are addressed both technologically and politically (from the viewpoint of power, governance, and democracy). And that is why political semiotics is a crucial addition to other forms of political analysis.

NOTES

1. The example is partly based on Ventsel and Madisson (2019).
2. Such image design is being coordinated, from 2017 onwards, by the communication agency Callisto Group; a detailed description of their main messages and a list of spokespersons can be found in the document “e-Eesti rahvusvahelise maine edendamise ajakohastatud tegevuskava aastateks 2018–2019” [“Plan for the promotion of Estonia’s international reputation for the years 2018–2019”]: https://www.ria.ee/sites/default/files/content-editors/ITT/e-eesti_rahvusvahelise_maine_edendamise_tegevuskava_2018-2019.pdf.
3. The number constitutes a large majority of Estonian citizens. The entire population of Estonia (non-citizens and minors included) is about 1.3 million people.
4. Gemalto is an international digital security company (Headquarter in Amsterdam, the Netherlands), with total assets of about 4.5 billion dollars, that produces smart cards and various software applications. It is estimated to be the largest manufacturer of SIM cards in the world.
5. Full text of the warning can be found here: https://twitter.com/CERT_EE/status/926475950883328000.
6. From June 2018, the party is named Pro Patria (Isamaa).
7. Estonian Reform Party has the highest support among the e-voters according to recent couple of elections in Estonia.
8. Theoretical security risk was discovered by a group of researchers, led by Czech Petr Svenda.
9. Pau is referring to press conference (September 5, 2017) that was organized by government PPA and RIA in order to inform the public about security risks of ID-card.

REFERENCES


What have we learned from this long journey? To put the complex and often detailed analyses of this book in a nutshell we could say that we have put forth a theory, methodology and method for political analysis that is relational, empirically oriented, and can be utilized for both critical and analytical research of power, governance, and democracy and the topics related to these core categories of the political (wicked problems, problematization and de-problematization, populism and democratization and de-democratization, etc.). Even if the proposed approach we call “political semiotics” is preliminary, possibly full of flaws and in need of being developed further (especially when it comes to its empirical applications), we can consider it to be the first attempt at bringing meaning-oriented analytical framework to politics into a systematic dialogue with understandings of power, governance, and democracy as they are conceptualized in political theory, political science, public administration, and the methodology of the social sciences. Usually, there is an unbalance between these two parts of the argument. At one extreme we can see approaches that have highly sophisticated techniques and methods for analyzing meaning-systems and communication with no attempt to theorize whatsoever the crucial notions of the political. The latter are figured out usually through recourse to common-sense understandings of power, governance, or democracy as the analyst goes along with his or her linguistically oriented analysis. Sometimes recourse to general social theories is taken, but without actually theorizing the categories, but
pointing to seemingly obvious connections. This is roughly the picture that opens up in various social semiotic perspectives and critical discourse analysis: for them the nature of the political is *obvious* and the puzzling issue is how to untangle it from meaning for which they have a myriad of tools, techniques, and micro-level theories. The other extreme is more or less the opposite: when a political scientist argues that meanings, discourse, and culture are important for making sense of politics she tends to treat meaning as more or less *obvious* and has no theories or research methods for untangling its constitution. This book has tried to develop a balanced approach of political semiotics that would be based on a deep engagement with theories of meaning and theories of the political. In addition, we have explicated the *meta*-theoretical background of our approach in terms of the relational turn in the social sciences, and the *methodological* implications of these and their connection to the *theoretical* framework and *methods* we propose. These two steps are never included in either of the extremes of meaning-oriented approaches to the political. And in that sense, the current book, no matter how many flaws it might have in some of its details, can be viewed as a blueprint for furthering the “relational turn” in political analysis. There is a need for comprehensive views to take the “turn” from meta-theory to theory to methodology to methods. This is what we have attempted here.

Let us recap the steps that have been made in this book. The meta-theory we propose is pretty simple: the major difference between relational and non-relational approaches is not in their emphasis on the importance of social relations in their analyses, but the fundamentally different understanding of those relations. Relational approaches view relations as *constitutive*, and therefore, the entities and their relations cannot be considered as being separate from one another. A non-relational approach presumes the primacy and givenness of entities that might or might not enter relations with other such entities. In most cases, the relations in that sense are presumed to be *causal*, which entails considering relations and entities as being separate from one another. This simple thesis informed our discussion on the differences between self-actional, inter-actional, and trans-actional approaches in conceptualizing different perspectives in political science and governance (Chapter 3), semiotics (Chapters 4 and 5), and later in different views of (social) scientific explanation (Chapters 7 and 8).
In Chapter 3, we highlighted that all the three significant phenomena of interest for political analysis could be conceptualized in terms of meaning-making and cultural and communicative processes by distinguishing self-actional, inter-actional, and trans-actional approaches to power, governance, and democracy. This needed to be complemented with the pertinent discussions of simple, complex, wicked, and de-problematized political/governance problems and the processes of problematization and de-problematization as forms of politics/governance. In addition, we argued that the notion of “hegemony” as elaborated by the Essex school of political theory (Laclau, Mouffe, and others) lies at the intersection of the three core notions of relational political analysis and that it is at the same time defined in terms of the constitution of meaning-systems that are defined in thoroughly relational manner. We also pointed out that the political needs to be conceptualized mostly in terms of process rather than certain “arena” (parliaments, governments, etc.) where it takes place. At the same time, we should not ignore the historically relevant connotation of “publicness” when it comes to conceptualizing the political.

Our journey continued in Chapter 4 with an excursus to the neglection of semiotics in the social sciences that usually depict it as a form of structuralism. That is why it was important for us to demonstrate that structuralism is but one of the research programs within semiotics. And it is a self-actionalist one. In addition, there are more inter-actionally oriented programs (e.g., post-structuralism, dialogicality) and trans-actionalist perspectives (mostly for us found in the tradition of cultural semiotics).

It is in Chapter 5 that we put forth a relational theory of meaning and its constitutive connection with hegemony—the latter being a crucial category lying at the intersection of power, governance, and democracy as we briefly point out already in Chapter 3. In the fifth chapter, we demonstrate that the core categories of the Essex school of political analysis (Laclau, Mouffe, and others) are congenial to the core categories of the Tartu-Moscow School of cultural semiotics (Lotman and others). We argued that despite different theoretical vocabulary, the categories of the Essex school and those of the Tartu-Moscow School are pointing to the same underlying conceptual logic. Through this synthesis, we could provide a general relational theory of the political. Essentially we put forth a theory that every meaning-system is constituted through establishing a core or center (“empty signifier” in Laclau’s
sense) through which discrete elements are translated into a unified whole or system that has boundaries which entail excluding (or pushing to the periphery) of specific other meanings of that whole or system. Such a constitution is inherently political in the sense that it involves privileging and exclusion of different meanings through establishing a particular center for the system which dominates as a hegemonic core of the system, giving it its primary identity. But how does this constitution work? Here we pointed out the crucial connection between meaning and communication and highlighted it, besides recourse to cultural semiotics, through neo-structuralism (Heiskala) that sees the original Saususrean project of semiotics to be mainly research of the contingent articulation of meaning in communication. Yet, can we say something more concretely on this articulation? For this, we put forth a concrete conceptual framework in Chapter 6 for political semiotic analysis of the political based on the framework developed in Chapter 5 and the model of communication of Roman Jakobson. We related theories of power, governance, and democracy to the Jakobsonian model of communication that distinguishes six aspects of each communicative act: emotive aspect (orientation toward the addressee), phatic aspect (orientation toward contact), poetic aspect (orientation toward message), conative aspect (orientation toward the addressee), referential aspect (orientation toward context), and metalingual aspect (orientation toward code). In addition, these aspects can be positioned along with the two fundamental tensions in each meaning-system or communication: the tendency toward the metonymic articulation of meaning and the tendency toward metaphoric articulation. We relate the latter tendencies to the topics of problematization and de-problematization of policy issues. Consequently, we outlined political semiotic categories that could be used for empirical analyses of political phenomena. These categories, we argued, are not meant for merely describing different forms of communication, but for explaining them. But what kind of explanation is implied here?

In Chapter 7, we took up the methodological challenges of political semiotics as a form of relational political analysis. We outlined the core distinction between causal and constitutive relations with which we started already in Chapter 2 in terms of explanation, research methodology, and design. We explicated in more detail the notion of constitutive explanation and demonstrated that this is what is at stake in relational understanding of social sciences. We compared it to causal explanation that is characteristic of variable-centered inter-actionalism in the social
sciences and also explicated why constitutive explanation always entails abductive research logic and untangled the specificity of abduction in view of the two prevalent logics in scientific and theoretical thinking—induction and deduction. It was important for us to highlight the essentially processual and relational character of abduction. We called the constitutive/abductive form of explanation and inference “context-sensitive code-selection” and demonstrated why semiotic explanation is fundamentally constitutive and abductive. How should we conduct research in view of our methodological proposals that, in turn, grow out from our theoretical and meta-theoretical background? This was reflected in Chapters 8 and 9, where we tried to illustrate through empirical examples and position more theoretically the method we called “political form analysis.”

The journey in the pages of this book is, of course, a beginning—and it is not only out of modesty that we refer to “introducing relational political analysis” in our title. It is an “introduction” and cannot be anything more than that since the attempt the book has been embarking on is one of its kind at the moment—an attempt to outline an approach to the political that would be relational throughout, from its meta-theoretical and theoretical premises through to its methodological implications and methods and preliminary empirical applications. As an introduction, it is also an invitation to discussion and a call for criticism and further development in all its aspects—conceptual and empirical. In the spirit of the relational explanation, we have been arguing for we can say that our book is a puzzling phenomenon that needs to be explained. This explanation is necessarily processual a movement from critical engagement with this puzzling phenomenon to further development, making intelligible its arguments by rejecting or accepting them through which both the identity of the phenomenon as well as the corresponding criticisms and analyses. And hopefully, this process is never completely final, since the “final” result itself is a part of the process. This is the agenda we leave with our proposal of political semiotics as a theory and method of relational political analysis.
Index

A
Abduction
and constitutive explanation, 9, 234, 240, 313
and induction and deduction, 9, 313
as relational research logic, 9
Adorno, T., 182
Alasuutari, P., 79
Argumentative turn, 78, 268

B
Bakhtin, M., 126, 166
Barthes, R., 108, 118, 121, 122, 124, 125, 127, 183
Bevir, M., 68, 267, 268
Bourdieu, P., 4, 27, 116, 162, 185, 187
Bronze-night discourse, 251–255

C
Clientelism, 188, 189, 255
Communication and culture, 83, 110–113, 128, 160
and democracy, 2, 4, 6, 8, 41, 83, 87, 110, 158, 173–175, 177, 178, 189, 193, 194, 197, 250, 282, 303, 312
functions of, 159, 161, 175, 177, 181, 186, 237, 238, 240, 299, 304
Jakobson’s model of, 161, 174
and meaning, 2, 4, 6–9, 41, 59, 78, 83, 92, 110, 112, 122, 123, 127, 128, 147, 156, 164–167, 173–175, 184, 191, 238, 250, 301, 309, 312
and power, 2, 4, 6–9, 41, 83, 98, 110, 161, 173, 174, 177–179, 185, 186, 188, 191, 196, 201, 204, 250, 270, 303, 309, 312
Content analysis, 9, 248, 249
Critical discourse analysis, 11, 267, 269, 310
Cultural semiotics, 2, 3, 6–8, 96, 110, 127, 129, 137, 140, 145, 154, 156, 159, 160, 166, 174, 238, 311, 312
Cultural theory, 79, 80

D
Democracy
inter-actional views, 4, 5, 9, 80, 82, 311
self-actional views, 5, 80–82, 311
trans-actional views, 4–6, 41, 80, 83, 84, 86, 87, 137, 311
Dépeltau, F., 28
Discourse
as constitutive, 21, 27, 87, 96, 113, 137, 138, 155, 174, 196, 206, 250, 263, 267, 282, 284–286, 302
and hegemony, 6, 7, 91, 96, 97, 110, 137, 139, 151, 154, 156, 158, 159, 173, 176
and semiosphere, 127, 129, 137, 140, 141, 143, 152, 156, 160, 173, 254, 300
and text, 11, 127, 129, 141, 146, 159, 173, 196, 247, 250, 254, 298, 302, 304
Douglas, M., 79

E
Elias, N., 4, 23, 27, 30, 49, 52, 53
Emirbayer, M., 2–4, 15–17, 24–26, 29, 30
Estonian ID-card crisis discourse, 284, 286, 289
European Migrant Crisis, 10, 58, 256, 257, 261, 262, 264, 266, 267
Explanation
causal, 9, 138, 206, 215, 216, 219–221, 225, 227, 234, 312
in social sciences, 9, 33, 216, 220, 233, 313

F
Form analysis, 1, 9–11, 74, 179, 241, 247–250, 256, 266, 269–271, 313
Functions of language, 176, 177, 207, 238

G
Governance
complex problems of, 5, 58, 74
as de-problematization, 8, 9, 70, 74, 75, 78, 247, 255, 261, 265, 285, 290, 297, 303, 309, 311
de-problematized problems of, 5, 10, 56, 311
inter-active, 54, 55, 59, 62–66, 69, 70, 72, 74, 195
relational approach to, 41, 55, 65, 66, 69, 310
self-active, 54, 55, 59–65, 70–72, 74, 82, 195
simple problems of, 5, 58, 60
trans-active, 54, 55, 59, 60, 65, 66, 68, 70, 72, 74, 98
wicked problems of, 5, 10, 55–57, 60, 64, 65, 69–72, 74, 198, 305, 309

H
Habermas, J., 85, 87, 182, 183, 191–194, 196, 199
Hegemony, 6, 7, 41, 91–98, 107, 110, 137, 139, 151, 153–159, 173, 174, 176, 238, 240, 270, 311
Heiskala, R., 118, 119, 161–166, 312

I
Inter-action, 25, 31, 34, 45, 47, 82, 123
Interpretive political science, 3, 11, 268

J
Jessop, B., 55, 59, 62, 66, 69–71, 73, 74, 185, 187, 198

K
Kress, G., 270
Kristeva, J., 123–125

L
Lefort, C., 88, 89, 196, 203
Lévi-Strauss, C., 118–121

M
Marxism, 2, 4, 43, 93, 109, 138
Marx, K., 15, 175, 185
Mouffe, C., 6, 68, 88–97, 107–109, 113, 144, 155, 157, 175, 176, 196–199, 311

P
Political form analysis, 1, 9–11, 74, 179, 241, 247, 248, 250, 256, 266, 270, 271, 313
Political semiotics, 1–3, 5, 6, 8, 11, 78, 91, 96, 110, 129, 137, 173, 176, 206, 215, 241, 247, 248,
Populism
authoritarian, 177, 179, 185, 186, 203, 255
and democracy, 177–179, 186, 199, 201, 237, 309
democratic, 10, 180, 186, 187, 237, 255
totalitarian, 178–180, 201, 203, 255

Power
Elias on, 49, 52
Foucault on, 4, 42, 49–52, 115, 116
Hobbes on, 4, 42, 46–48, 54
inter-actional views, 4, 26, 34, 42, 45, 47, 49, 54, 311
relational views on, 2, 4, 6
self-actional views, 4, 23–25, 42, 43, 46, 47, 54, 82
trans-actional views, 4, 41, 42, 49, 52, 54, 69, 137, 311

Problematicization/deproblematicization in political discourse, 5, 8, 9, 11, 70, 74, 78, 177, 207, 242, 247, 261, 265, 297, 309, 311, 312

Q
Qadir, A., 79

R
Relational political analysis, 1, 3, 6, 8, 11, 41, 96, 129, 137, 179, 309, 311–313
Relational sociology, 2–4, 9, 15, 16, 26, 29, 30, 52, 224, 249
Relational turn, 1, 3, 15, 16, 107, 310
Rhodes, R., 61, 268

S
Saussure, F., 1, 107, 115, 117–121, 127, 161–166, 238–240
Self-action, 23, 29, 31, 34, 42, 47, 81, 116
Semiosphere, 7, 117, 127, 128, 140–144, 152, 156, 160, 173, 238, 254, 300
Semiotic categories for explaining the political, 177, 205
Semiotics
as constitutive explanation, 215, 238, 240, 242
inter-actional, 6, 116, 123, 126, 310, 311
self-actional, 116, 120, 123, 126, 129, 310, 311
trans-actional, 3, 6, 8, 84, 116, 117, 127, 129, 137, 161, 165, 166, 215, 310, 311
Semiotic theory
of democracy, 1, 5, 6, 9, 30, 74, 161, 238, 240, 270
governance, 1, 3, 5, 8–10, 161, 238, 240, 270
of hegemony, 6, 7, 240
Structuralism
and individualism, 43, 44, 59
and semiotics, 2, 6, 108–110, 114–118, 120, 123, 126, 137, 161, 162, 311, 312
Substantsionalism and relationalism, 4, 17, 18, 20, 22, 29, 30, 41, 270

T
Trans-action, 26, 32, 34, 49, 84, 127, 161, 165, 166

W
Van Leeuwen, T., 270, 285

Wicked problems
and de-problematization, 74, 261
governing of, 10, 55, 58, 60, 69
and simple and complex problems, 5, 10, 57, 58, 60

Wedgeen, L., 84–86, 114, 115
Weber, M., 4, 42, 43, 138, 185, 190, 196, 204, 217
Van Dijk, T., 270