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Contingent, contested and constructed: a poststructuralist response to Stevens' ontological politics of drug policy

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In his recent article, Stevens (2020) asks us to consider what is *real* in drug policy, arguing that the answers to this ontological question have *political* implications. While his reflexive engagement with ontology is welcome, we challenge his critique of 'radical constructionism', and reject the charges of 'empirical ambivalence' and '*ersatz* epistemic egalitarianism'. In so doing, we draw upon the resources of Poststructuralist Discourse Theory (PDT), which is a perspective that shares many of the ontological assumptions that Stevens names 'radical constructionism'. While PDT rejects the assertion that 'there is no reality anterior to observation' (Stevens, 2020: 1), it does question the essential and fixed character of reality. Instead it affirms the contingent and contested nature of all objects and social relations, as it seeks to disclose the different ways that social phenomena are (or may be) constructed in reality and our related representations (e.g. Laclau and Mouffe, 2014). Moreover, proponents of the approach claim that the outcomes of their research *do* rest upon transparent methodological criteria, while affirming the value and utility of using poststructuralist assumptions in developing a powerful method of critical policy analysis. In our view, such assumptions carry significant ethical, normative and, crucially, political implications for our understanding of drug policy (Glynos and Howarth, 2007).

When constructionists argue that research problems and objects of investigation are constituted by subjects, and are not just given or present in a pre-existing social reality, it can easily be thought that they ignore or disregard the existence of an external reality. But in focussing on the practices through which drug policy, or the use and abuse of drugs, are problematized in society by different actors, and then the problematization of such problematizations by analysts and scientists, they do not deny the reality or actuality of such phenomena. On the contrary, they seek to disclose the different ways that phenomena are (or may be) constructed in social reality - or the multiple social realities that come into play through such constructions - and they endeavour to discern the social, political and ideological logics that are at work in their production, particularly when these articulations 'work in the same register of "political rationality" as that which they purport to criticise' (Brown, 1998: 44; see also Standring, 2017a).

Poststructuralism, like constructivism, is a broad umbrella term that encompasses a number of different ontological and epistemological commitments. It is useful here to briefly discuss what distinguishes our approach – Poststructuralist Discourse Theory (PDT) - from related perspectives. In the first instance, PDT's genealogy lies in the post-Marxism of Ernesto Laclau and the Essex School, especially the endeavour to move the Marxist tradition away from the economic determinism and class reductionism of its classical and orthodox antecedents, thereby emphasizing the role of politics, critique and hegemony in social analysis (Howarth, 2018). Taking their inspiration from the early Foucault and others, discourse analysts like Carol Bacchi tended to focus on discourse as representations, speech acts or knowledge practices (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Bacchi's more recent scholarship has evolved to highlight discourse as enactment, understanding how different discursive elements are brought together in the process of making multiple realities (Bacchi, 2018, see also Lancaster & Rhodes, 2020). For us too, realities are multiple (and always partial and incomplete) which brings later Bacchi closer to our position and to that of Mol's idea of 'ontological politics' (Mol, 1999), though there remain important differences, not least because of the importance granted within PDT to the antagonisms that emerge through the radical contingency of discourse. The sedimentation and stabilization of particular social realities entail relations of dominance and oppression which are understood through the logic of hegemony, and the creation of linkages between different struggles and demands which forefronts the political (on which we expand later).

In distinguishing PDT from adjacent approaches, two interrelated concepts are of fundamental importance: the ideas of radical materiality and radical contingency. In terms of its commitment to radical materialism, discourse is conceptualized as an 'articulatory practice' that constitutes objects within discursive systems. Embedded in discourses, objects are not just objects of knowledge (cf. Fraser & Moore, 2011), but real things that we encounter in the social world. Moreover, the objects that are constituted in such systems are always partial and incomplete, that is, they are radically contingent, which means that rival forces and political projects can construct them in

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different ways. Indeed, it is through the practices and technologies of political power that certain constructions (e.g. the notion of drugs as inherently addictive or harmful) become sedimented, while their radical contingency is obscured and relations of domination are naturalized (Howarth, 2009). Put more technically, the form of objects and objectivity does not exhaust their materiality, so that they can be constructed differently by rival practices and projects.

Within the PDT framework, the category of discourse combines linguistic and non-linguistic elements, so there is no ontological separation between words, concepts, representations and ideas, on the one hand, and actions, practices or material processes on the other, as if these two series were external to one another. Rather, all these components are connected together in particular discourses or 'systems of meaningful practice' (Howarth, Glynos & Griggs, 2016). So although the existence of a physical substance called a 'drug' is not denied, it is recognised that political disputes and policy debates about what is termed a drug - how, where and why it is consumed, for example, and how states may seek to regulate it – are constituted through our discourses and practices, and the wider system of social relations to which they belong. A drug may be understood as a medical or legal term, or it may acquire meaning within a cultural or religious practice. It may be considered a substance that will alter an organism's physiological state or it may be a commodity to be bought or sold. As Professor David Nutt and colleagues have long claimed, the legal status of drugs such as alcohol and tobacco, when compared to illicit drugs, is not based on an objective external reality, but reflects cultural and political judgements (Nutt *et al*, 2010). Where proponents of PDT would depart from the work of Nutt and his colleagues is that they would deny the capacity of science to provide an uncontested, objective or fixed interpretation of reality. The role of PDT in these circumstances is explicitly explanatory and critical, as it seeks to analyse the social structures and relations that legitimize or authorize the reproduction and sedimentation of certain meanings and practices and the exclusion of others. For example, they would seek to understand how, why and under what circumstances scientific practices and knowledge have the legitimacy to authoritatively define a drug and, accordingly, to inform policy (Butler, 1992: 7; Butler, 2006; Howarth, Glynos & Griggs, 2016).

Stevens contends that radical constructivism 'abandons the attempt to ground knowledge claims on its relationship with antecedent reality' (Stevens, 2020: 3), leading to the charge of empirical ambivalence. In responding to this criticism, it is worth reiterating our claim that discourses are not just 'talk or text in context', but concrete social practices that crystallise and embody certain logics. Such logics can be captured by detecting the rules and objects that condition what can be said or done in a particular frame or context, and they can be further tested by considering related phenomena. This can be seen in the way that a public-health or human-rights based approach to drug policy, for example, is embedded in the shift towards a 'neutral' language of the drug phenomena - from addiction to problematic drug use (PDU), or from drug users to people who use drugs (PWUD) - as well as in concrete measures such as harm reduction interventions and depenalization of use. Political logics enable the researcher to account for the emergence and sedimentation of practices and policies by examining the antagonisms and struggles through which they are forged. In the case of drug policy, for example, we might point here to the way in which advocates of liberalization position themselves and build discourse coalitions through the linking together of disparate demands (e.g. harm reduction, medicalization, human rights, evidence-based policymaking) (Standring, 2017b), which can be defined and articulated *against* punitive practices (see, for example, Howarth, 2009: 317).

Stevens' subsequently contends that radical constructivists believe that 'no particular way of representing what occurs in the world is superior to a contrasting account', while simultaneously 'creating accounts of the world that are self-evidently presented as being superior to others' (Stevens, 2020, 3-4). How, then, can proponents of PDT, who deny an essentialized, pre-discursive reality external to any discourse or explanatory narrative, provide an extra-discursive or referential yardstick with which to measure and judge explanations? The fulcrum around which the critical ethos of PDT revolves is based on our ontological assumption of the radical contingency of the objects, processes and practices under investigation, and the political and ethical contestation that follows from this contingency. Political logics allow policy analysts to show other possibilities of social organization that arise when the 'ignoble beginnings' of rules and norms are first instituted - usually involving the exclusion of rival options - and then contested; researchers and critics can thus detect and construct alternative policies and practices that are foreclosed or dominated.

What is more, from a PDT point of view, normative questions require the analyst to *characterize* those relations that are perceived to be oppressive or unfair by uncovering their social logics, and by elaborating and developing alternative values or principles. Here, for example, we can consider the racialised and gendered impact of drug policy as being forged within the context of broader social repressions and discriminatory practices. Those theoretical and practical interventions that neglect such contexts and social logics are very likely to reproduce the repressive practices they aim to alleviate. In fact, these normative and critical considerations bring out a further departure from Stevens' way of thinking, as they allow us to specify further the PDT approach by highlighting the political dimensions of 'ontological politics'. That is to say, in stressing the radical contingency of the conditions and outcomes of discourse, we are able to disclose and explore the repeated political struggles that aim to stabilize and destabilize the meaning and import of social objects, so that politics is understood as 'the contestation and institution of social relations and practices' (Howarth, Glynos & Griggs, 2016). In short, to characterise sedimented meanings and practices in terms of their discursive logics (social, political, fantasmatic) is ultimately to foreground their contingency and contestability which, as Glynos and Howarth have noted (2007: 121), is to presuppose that these practices are worthy of contestation in the first place. This allows the researcher to critically account for the initial misrecognition of these practices as natural or essential, while facilitating the reactivation and articulation of alternative formulations. This is precisely the critical and counter-hegemonic potential of the post-Marxist conception of hegemony.

In conclusion, our short reply has shown that poststructuralists and radical constructionists who ground their analyses on the assumptions of PDT are committed to an anti-essentialist ontology, where our contingent forms can never fully capture the materiality of real things, coupled with a post-foundational conception of knowledge and methodology. Such assumptions lead us to conceive of our objects of knowledge as precarious and incomplete constructions whose character and meaning varies in relation to the different discourses and practices through which they are constituted. Poststructuralists also seek to problematize, characterize and explain the different logics that govern the emergence and formation of objects, where the focus is on the social, political and ideological conditions of their production, reproduction and change. The resultant empirical accounts of problematized phenomena can be tested in terms of their ability to resolve or dissolve the dilemmas that gave rise to their study in the first place, and they can be verified and justified by their degree of verisimilitude, that is to say, by determining whether or not they offer credible and persuasive narratives of such phenomena, as evaluated by the appropriate tribunals of scholars, practitioners and affected parties.

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